



What if he cries?

by Rick Belden

I was very encouraged to come across a post recently called [“What If He Cries?”](#) by Diane A. (D.A.) Sears, United States Coordinator for [International Men’s Day](#) (coming this November 19). In her post, Diane advocates for women to make safe spaces for men to be emotionally genuine during times of grief, sorrow, and loss. She says:

For Women, supporting the emotional and mental well-being of our husbands, sons, fiancées, brothers, uncles, fathers, grandfathers, nephews, and cousins will require us to examine everything we have been taught about Men and to weigh whether it is true or not. We cannot begin to help and support Men if we cling to false and stereotypical beliefs about them. Our conscious and subconscious beliefs about Men drive our behavior towards them.

Diane makes a lot of great points, but I need to expand on one area of her post. She says:

If he cries, without hesitation, run to him ... hold him ... comfort him. Tell him that you are here for him and that you love. Let him know that he can shed tears in front of you and that it will, in no way, in your eyes, diminish his manliness.

While this may be a successful approach with some men, I would also encourage women to remember that other men (especially men with abuse and/or trauma history) may need space and strong, steady, silent witness to feel safe expressing deep emotions with others, at least in the early stages of doing so. Touching, talking, and hugging may all be too overwhelming and, although well-intended, may actually shut down the man you are trying to reassure.

Each man is different, and will have different needs in different situations. He may, for example, have easier access to expressing his deeper emotions in response to the death of a beloved pet than he does in response to memories of being damaged and traumatized as a child. Women can use their intuition and their own felt sense, as well as their knowledge of the man and his history, to guide their actions in each case.

It may take some experimentation (and some failure) to find out what works best with a given man. It is also important for a woman to check in with her own feelings about what a man is experiencing to assure herself that her motivations and actions are conscious and clear. For example, when you feel the impulse to hold and comfort a grieving man, are you perhaps motivated, at least in part, by a need or desire to calm him down because his expression of grief unsettles you? If so, you may find your approach to him rejected. Men with a history of having their emotions controlled and shut down by others typically have a pretty strong innate sense of when someone is approaching them with that intent, and they will close down quickly in response.

Men often keep the depth and complexity of their inner lives fairly well hidden, to the extent that it is commonly assumed by many (too many) that men are emotional and psychological simpletons or cold mechanical creatures who have no depth and complexity to speak of, especially in comparison to women. But nothing could be farther from the truth, and many men, no matter how protective they may be of what lies hidden within them, are starving for just the sort of safe harbor in their lives that Diane describes in her post:

Women with open minds and open hearts can create a “safe harbor” for the Men in their lives — a place where Men can bare their souls and lay down their emotional baggage. The “safe harbor” is a place that is “drama free” – a place where unconditional love, respect and trust abides. If a Man feels and knows that you respect him, he will trust you and allow himself to be vulnerable. He will bare his soul.

I haven't experienced such a safe harbor yet myself. I hope to, someday. I also hope for a day when every man has a safe harbor in his life, as this can only benefit everyone around him: men, women, children, and the culture at large.

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Rick Belden is a respected explorer and chronicler of the psychology and inner lives of men. His book, [*Iron Man Family Outing: Poems about Transition into a More Conscious Manhood*](#), is widely used in the United States and internationally by therapists, counselors, and men's groups as an aid in the exploration of masculine psychology and men's issues, and as a resource for men who grew up in dysfunctional, abusive, or neglectful family systems. His second book, [*Scapegoat's Cross: Poems about Finding and Reclaiming the Lost Man Within*](#), is currently awaiting publication. He lives in Austin, Texas.

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