



FUNERAL CHAPEL

Dedicated To Those We Serve

Caring Connections:

The Grieving Family

Of all the events in a family, including birth, baptism, confirmation, bar mitzvah, graduation, or marriage, death is the one which we anticipate the least. All of the other major events receive months, even years of preparation, while comparatively speaking, death receives very little.

Why is this? Well, whether it is an expected or sudden death, we don't want to prepare for it. Death is an unwelcome guest in our family and homes. Death is an intrusion into our lives. Death destroys our plans and dreams for the future. Death causes turmoil in our personal lives and in our relationships. Death takes us into worlds about which we know very little: funeral homes, hospitals, lawyers offices and sometimes the police. A death in the family also raises spiritual questions that baffle us and often provide more questions than answers.

One of the least understood aspects of the grieving process is the affect it has on a family unit. A family functions much like an executive committee. Each member has responsibilities and obligations. Although not all members necessarily get along equally well, a way of relating develops over the years that allows the family to function as a unit. When one of the members dies, the remaining members often have to establish new ways of communicating with each other. They often begin to share the responsibilities of the one who died. The big difference between an executive committee and a family of course, is that when a family member dies, the family can't hold a vote to replace him or her!

So it is important to understand how a family responds to a death and how a family can help itself move successfully through grief.

What affects a family's ability to grieve?

1. *Who is it that has died?* For example, the death of a mother or father will mean the loss of a leader and central figure in the family. Ask yourself, "What has been taken away by this death?" If the one who died was chronically ill and the schedule of the family evolved around that person, the family may have difficulty adjusting to having a lot of time to fill with new interests and activity.
2. *Every member of the family will experience the loss differently.* If a mother dies, a son may feel it differently than a daughter. Her husband will feel it differently than anyone else in the family. Every relationship involves different losses. The way individuals grieve those losses may cause conflict in the family.

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3. *How much support can your family give itself?* Many families find it difficult to talk about the death among themselves. This may be because they are afraid of upsetting another member. Family members sometimes feel they are unable to support other relatives who are grieving because they are overwhelmed by their own grief.

4. *Family authority will be tested.* If there are children living at home after a young parent dies, they will almost certainly test the authority of the surviving parent. It is a potentially difficult period in these relationships. Sibling rivalry may increase.

5. *Communication is an age old problem with most families.* If a family has difficulty communicating before a death occurs, it is highly unlikely communication will improve immediately after a death. Poor communication will hamper their ability to resolve their grief as a family.

6. *Family rules around death and dying.* Funeral traditions are handed down from generation to generation. These traditions may not always be helpful or suited to the person who died. If a family feel under pressure to do “what the rest of the family expects” it may mean that the needs of individuals are not met by the funeral rituals. This is especially true as it applies to children. The exclusion of children from a funeral will almost certainly complicate their grieving.

7. *Are there other stresses in the family?* Are there concerns about health or finances? Has a major family dispute erupted as a result of this death? Perhaps there are others in the family who require special ongoing care. If this is the case, family members may experience difficulty finding the time or emotional energy to process their grief properly.

How can your family help itself through this period?

1. Work at keeping the line of communication open!

Involve all family members in decision making. Continue to celebrate important events no matter how difficult it is. A casual comment such as, “Mom and Dad would have been married 45 years today” is a simple way of keeping communication open. Talk about your loved one daily and share both happy and sad memories.

2. Don't forget the children in the family!

Make them part of important decisions that must be made. This will reduce their fears about the future and their own insecurity. Be honest with them. In fact, it is important for the whole family to deal honestly with the reality of the death regardless of the cause. This will help you to resolve your grief. It will also allow others to support you.

3. Respect the needs of individuals in the family.

Remember that each person mourns the loss for different reasons and in their own way. Individuals may need to have time alone and may seek help outside the family.

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4. Reach out for support.

Individuals may find it helpful to join a support group. The family may seek the advice and support of a clergy person, a counsellor or an agency if difficulties become too great to deal with alone. It is helpful to talk to someone who isn't emotionally involved and who can provide objective insights.

5. Begin to make plans for the future.

Although you would like to have your loved one back, you can't. Life will never be the same. Although old family customs may be familiar, they are often painful. Be open to recreating your life. There is a future.

6. Don't give up...remember it takes time.

Family members need to be gentle and patient with each other. Each will grieve in his or her own way and time. Eventually you will heal. There will be laughter and happy times again.

7. Draw on the resources of your spirituality.

Kahlil Gibran wrote "And what is it to cease breathing, but to free the breath from its restless tides that it may rise and seek God unencumbered." For many, a death is a challenge to their faith. For others death deepens their faith. Some whose spirituality has been "on hold" find their spirituality reawakened and they begin a new spiritual journey.

8. Plan a family memorial.

Many families find that doing something in memory of a loved one can be helpful. It is one way of bringing the family together to plan something. You may want to plant a tree in memory of your loved one. Making a donation to the library of a school the person attended is a good idea. Some families make a donation to an organization they or their loved one supported.

And finally, the grieving process has the potential for changing you and your family for the better. If you can say "yes" to that concept, then life will be renewed. Life will take on new meaning. The memory of your loved one will continue to move you and inspire you for the rest of your life.

Suggested Additional Reading:

Rando, Therese A. *How To Go On Living When Someone You Love Dies*. New York: Bantam Books, 1991.

Rosen, Elliott J. *Families Facing Death*. New York: Lexington Books, 1990.

Saynor, John K. *GENESIS: A Personal Guide Through Grief*. Warkworth, ON: GENESIS Bereavement Resources, 1991.

Shapiro, Ester R. *Grief As A Family Process*. New York: Guilford Publications, 1994.

"Good Grief!"

"When Your Parent Dies"

"How Do Dead People Get Chocolate Cake?"

"Anticipatory Grief: What is it?"

"When Your Spouse Dies"

"My Child Has Died!"

"The Grief That Can't Be Spoken: AIDS, Murder, Suicide, Divorce"

"When A Young Friend Dies"

"I Can't Face The Holidays!"