

The Grieving Family

How often have we heard the phrase “The family has never been the same since (the person) died”?

The truth is that things can never be the same after the death of somebody in your family. When a close relative dies, it not only causes major grief for you as an individual, it also affects how your family functions. This doesn't mean that your family will never function well again, but adjusting to the death can be painful and it takes time.

How do families grieve?

Each family grieves in its own way, just as each person grieves in their own way. Most families have unwritten ‘rules’ about what can be spoken about and what feelings can be expressed openly. These rules often become more obvious when there is a crisis in the family, such as a death. Some families are comfortable being sad, angry or upset in front of one another. In other families, it is frowned on to let people know how you are feeling. Some families see crying as a sign of weakness or may only be comfortable with women crying, not men. Families also differ in how much information they share with each other and how much they include the children in family business.

One of the tasks that a family faces when somebody dies is to find a way to grieve together. It is important that family members have a chance to share their grief. This does not have to be done in any particular way and can vary greatly from family to family.

The time immediately after a death is usually a time when relatives come together. While some families find this closeness very supportive, others find it difficult. Some families rarely get together and may find it stressful to spend a lot of time together. Most families have disagreements and arguments, particularly when things are stressful. It is not unusual for families to disagree over decisions concerning the funeral, the burial or the personal effects.

During the weeks and months after a death you may want to talk about the person who died, to reminisce with other family members or to cry. Other family members may prefer to keep their feelings to themselves. Some family members may feel ready to get back to work or to begin socialising again soon after the death, and this can be difficult for others to accept. Some people may avoid mentioning the person who died in case it may upset others. This can lead to misunderstandings. As one young man commented: “Nobody mentions Mary anymore, am I the only one who remembers her?”

Different family relationships

When a family member dies, the loss is different for everyone. For example, if you are grieving the death of your husband, others will be grieving the death of their father, their brother, their grandfather, uncle and so on. We all have different relationships within the family. Some family members will be particularly close, while others may have a strained relationship. This explains partly why people within the family have different grief reactions.

Family roles

Each member has several roles within the family. Roles such as wage earner, parent, child, carer and sibling are very important and the absence of the person who filled that role will be deeply felt. For example, there are financial issues when a wage earner dies. Or if the mother of young children dies, they will need childcare.

Other roles may be less obvious but can leave gaps in the family that make it difficult to function, for example the role of peacemaker, the person who knows how to break tension with a joke or the person who remembers important family occasions. Family members may expect a particular person to take on a role and this can cause tension. As one woman put it:

“Everyone assumed I would take over Dad’s care when Mom died, but I have just started a new job.”

No one can ever replace the person who died, but with time and good communication most families adjust to the loss and find new ways to function together.

As your family grieves, remember

- Everyone grieves differently. Allow each member to grieve in their own way.
- Try to talk openly with other family members. Let them know how you feel and listen to what they have to say. Expect that others will have different opinions and points of view.
- When somebody dies, the family is changed and everyone has to adjust to those changes. This can be very difficult, but most families find their own way through it.
- It can help to talk to someone outside the family if your family is having particular difficulties.