

Grief in the Family

Even though you belong to the same family and have lost the same loved one, each family member will react and express their emotions differently. Grief is an individual experience and families are made up of individual personalities with distinct relationships. Identifying and accepting personal differences helps the family create supportive environments and is a key step in recovering from the pain of losing a loved one.

FAMILY MEMBERS MOURN DIFFERENTLY

Recognizing the different ways your family may grieve can help in understanding one another and prevent tension and arguments. The expression of grief is individual; influenced, but not defined, by gender, personality and age.

The following characteristics identified by Martin and Doka describe two types of grievers which fall at opposite ends of a “grieving continuum”. Most people fall in between and possess aspects of both.

Intuitive or “feeling” grievers

- Openly express their feelings: their actions match what is going on inside.
- Experience strong emotions and reactions: Crying, shouting, deeply upset.
- More sensitive and tend to internalize grief.
- Find it therapeutic to talk and ventilate their feelings: support groups, counseling.

Instrumental or “thinking grievers

- Experience grief by thinking, reflecting or being active.
- Try to be logical, get the facts and problem solve.
- May seem withdrawn or coldhearted but find it easier to deal with feelings by remaining strong or distanced from the situation.
- Find it hard to open up and may cover up their grief with an “its okay, I’m fine” attitude.
- Find comfort through reading (self-help books) or physical activities such as: baking, building, household chores, gardening.

Often, we assume that men grieve instrumentally while women grieve intuitively; this is not true! When someone is pressured to react to a loss in a certain way they are prevented from honestly expressing their emotions. Their outward response will not fit with their internal grief. Acceptance and support of each individual’s own way of grieving is necessary for their recovery.

TIPS ON HOW TO COPE WITH GRIEF AS A FAMILY

Tolerate differences and be patient with one another

- To openly communicate and understand one another, you must be sensitive to how each family member reacts to a loss
- Feelings such as anger, helplessness, guilt, confusion, denial, numbness and relief will vary between family members and may be experienced at different times.

Anticipate that sharing your grief might be difficult

- Often families are hesitant to talk about death because they are overwhelmed by emotions, and are worried that they will upset others
- Not sharing with your loved ones can lead to greater feelings of isolation and loneliness; it is difficult to work through grief by yourself.

Include all members of the family unit

- Remember that children grieve too.
- Both young and old can talk about their losses to one another.
- Treat each family member's needs as being just as important as others.

Changing family roles and responsibilities

- After a death, the family needs to reorganize to replace the roles and responsibilities filled by the deceased.
- Avoid overwhelming a member with new responsibilities that will distract them from facing their own grief.
- Do not expect only one person to be the supporter for the entire family.

Don't forget to take care of yourself

- Grief often makes us feel tired, so allow yourself time to rest. Take naps, listen to music or drink a glass of warmed milk before bed.
- Eat regular, balanced meals.
- Make time for the family to get out of the house for some activity: playing at the park, go for a bike ride or walk, play a game.

Remember together

- Create a scrapbook of photos, letters, poems and mementos that the family can work on collectively.

Keep changes minimal

- Limit adjustments such as moving houses, switching jobs or changing routines.
- Free up schedules as much as possible to eliminate any stress on the family

Important dates or holidays may trigger the experience or cause the revisiting of grief

- These include birthdays, anniversaries, a wedding, graduation, a visit to the hospital, the day when the patient was admitted, or daily routines (meals).
- Expect that you will experience some sorrow on these days.
- Find a ritual that will allow for acknowledgement of the death and celebration of the event: make a donation in your loved one's honor or reminisce over photos and family videos.

Collectively decide what family traditions will continue, be added or change

- Family traditions such as games night, Saturday morning breakfasts or annual ski trips might cause distress for some but be comforting for others.
- Make sure you discuss any changes as a group so that everyone can participate.

Maintain a supportive family environment

- Hold regular family meetings or schedule meal times where all members can attend.
- Give others the opportunity to share how they are feeling or what they are going through, to ask questions and listen to others.

Coping with a loss is an ongoing process

- Expect that the experience of the loss will emerge at late points in life.
- Families develop and change over time. At each stage a new realization about the loss can be made, new questions can be asked and better coping mechanisms may be discovered.

It is okay to accept outside help

- When the whole family is experiencing grief, it may be hard to rely on one another for advice and comfort. Turn to friends and loved ones; ask for help with groceries, picking up kids from school or some household chores.
- Support groups and family counseling is also available.

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