

Death—A Family Crisis

ROBERTA C. FRASIER
Family Life Specialist

DEATH as a family crisis strikes every family not once, but many times.

In years past the high death rate, location of family members close together, mourning and burial customs, and burial on the family farm made death an integral part of family living.

Today, many individuals achieve maturity without experiencing a death in the immediate family. Others reach adulthood without having attended a funeral.

In America we no longer carry out many of the rituals which prescribed a pattern for the bereaved person to follow. "Widow's weeds" are no longer worn; nor do most families wear black or wear a mourning band. Today we try to ignore the fact of death as much as possible.

Since first-hand experience is no longer part and parcel of everyday living, some understanding of the nature of bereavement is important preparation for living. This understanding helps us to give sympathetic and constructive help to others when they are bereaved.

Every religion deals with grief and death in terms of faith and philosophy. Throughout the ages man has tried to evolve an emotional technique for coping with grief. Psychologists and sociologists have studied reactions of many persons to bereavement and have identified some reactions to bereavement.

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Reactions to bereavement

No two people react the same way to any crisis, but some common feelings reported are these . . .

- A feeling of loss and grief—sorrow for the loved one, but also deep sorrow for ourselves and our loss.
- A feeling of numbness and shock. May be physical reaction to shock—feeling of detachment.
- A feeling of disbelief—I'm not part of this—it isn't happening to me—dreams in which the deceased is present.
- A feeling of desertion and even resentment at being left alone.
- A feeling of guilt—surely I could have done something—or why did I let him take such chances—why wasn't I more patient, or loving, or understanding?
- A feeling of self-pity—why did this happen to me? What have I done to deserve this?
- A feeling of depression—that life is not worth living.

There is no one “normal way” to react to death. Each person will respond in his own way. The circumstances of death, the age of the deceased, the relationship to the person, one's own physical health—these and many other things will determine reactions.

Other crises which create family strain often accompany death. Financial stress or extreme fatigue in case of a long illness complicate the family situation.

Recovery from bereavement

The bereaved person will make a better recovery if he . . .

- Accepts the fact that no amount of wishful thinking can bring the loved one back.
- Expresses as much grief as he feels.
- Makes an effort to adjust to the change.
- Assumes that he has to help himself instead of letting time solve all.
- Remembers that others have experienced grief and sorrow.
- Forms new relationships and develops new interests.
- Talks about his loss to others.
- Gives emotional support to other members of his family.
- Recognizes that complete adjustment is never achieved, but pain lessens with time.
- Expects his recovery to follow a pattern of “two steps forward and one step backward.”
- Tries to build a new life instead of trying to keep things the same.
- Will accept the emotional support of others.
- Has a meaningful religious faith.
- Has adequate financial reserves.
- Has close ties with family, relatives, and friends.
- Accepts his sorrow instead of trying to escape from it.

Forethought and planning

No one likes to dwell on the fact of death, but young families as well as older ones need to learn how to cope with the situation when it comes.

Decision making at the time of crisis can be eased by forethought and planning.

Who will you rely upon for advice and help?

What funeral director will you call?

What type of funeral do you prefer for yourself and family members?

What is your thinking about funeral expenses? What is the difference between the least expensive and the most expensive funeral?

Where will you want family members buried? If you prefer cremation, what disposition should be made of the remains?

Discussion of these points and legal information will make it possible to make wise decisions when death comes.

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