

Death

—a family crisis

Most of us avoid thinking about death even though we know it is a crisis that eventually affects every family. When family members or close friends die, the word "dead" is sometimes glossed over by using departed, passed on, passed away, or gone to heaven. Death has become such a taboo subject that mourning is viewed as a weakness rather than as a necessity.

In American and other Western cultures we no longer carry out many burial customs or mourning etiquette which specifies a course for grieving persons to observe. "Widows weeds" are no longer worn; nor do most families wear a mourning band. The crepe placed on the door of a home to symbolize a death is rarely seen. As we deny the fact that death and bereavement are inevitable, we also provide few guidelines for overcoming this crucial event.

In the past death was a constant part of daily living. The high death rate at early ages, close location of relatives to one another, and burial on the family farm or rural cemetery made death an integral part of family life. As the customs surrounding death and bereavement are yielded, families often feel left alone in their grief. In societies where rituals for the dead are established the role of the mourner is easier. There is a recognized time during which the bereaved take leave of the dead and realize their loss. They then begin

the process of adjustment and eventual return to the mainstream of life. It may seem strange to impose time limits on such a personal experience as grief. However, it provides guidelines that can protect the bereaved from suppressing their grief or from remaining in perpetual mourning.

Although there is no universal pattern for appropriate behavior for the bereaved, grief is a normal emotional expression. Suppression of grief can have undesirable effects. Many Americans are influenced by a belief that they must be strong and find it difficult to weep or show the intensity and loneliness of their crisis. Others respond naturally to their sorrow by openly weeping.

As with all emotions there is no one *right way* for expression. Restraining grief may extend the period of adjustment and recovery, affecting all of one's personal relationships and the return to normalcy. Grief precedes a reformulation of purpose that does not leave out the relationship with the dead but gradually seeks new attachments and commitments.

Stress charts based on case histories reveal that the death of a spouse is the most intense crisis a person can experience. The physical effects of the loss, and the drain on emotional energy and resources are of greater duration than other crises. The severity of change often causes a period of disorganization and uncertainty that may take several years to resolve.

Every religion has beliefs that deal with death and grief in terms of faith and philosophy. Throughout the centuries people have tried to understand death and how to cope with grief. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross, a pioneer in the study of death and dying, says that we cannot really live until we face our own death and realize we are all like snowflakes; each beautiful, different, and very temporary.

Some understanding of the nature of the grief and bereavement process is an important preparation for life. This understanding will help

during bereavement and enable us to give sympathetic support to others who are bereaved.

Reactions to Bereavement

No two people react the same to any crisis. People grieve in their own special way and at different times. The circumstances of death, the age of the deceased, the relationship to the person, one's own physical health, and other circumstances will affect personal reactions. We work through most of these reactions as we move toward recovery.

- A feeling of numbness and shock. There may be a physical reaction. A vague feeling of detachment.
- A feeling of disbelief; this 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 loss and grief; sorrow for the loved one who can no longer enjoy and sorrow for ourselves for having to go on without the deceased.
- A feeling of guilt. Why wasn't I more patient, loving or understanding? Why didn't I do more for him/her?
- A feeling of self pity. Why did this happen to me? What have I done to deserve this? Why was I picked out for this fate?
- A feeling of depression. Loss of interest in life. No one cares about what has happened to me.
- Enshrinement. A concentration on the dead, depriving the family of needed companionship. Elevating the deceased to sainthood.
- A feeling of anxiety. What will I do now? How will I manage?
- For some, religious beliefs are tested in attempting to find explanations.

Most of the reactions to bereavement are worked through as we move toward recovery. When we realize that our behaviors or feelings are not unusual, it is easier to accept ourselves and come to terms with our loss. Recovery is evident as we gradually enjoy ourselves without guilt and discover that our initial reactions to bereavement are quietly dissolving.

Recovery from Bereavement

Those who are bereaved can work at their recovery process if they:

- Accept the fact that wishful thinking will not bring back the loved one.
- Accept sorrow as normal rather than suppressing it. Express grief openly.
- Talk to others about their loss and personal feelings.
- Accept support and help from others.
- Remember that others who are grieving need emotional support.
- Seek professional help if their efforts seem inadequate.
- Plan to help themselves rather than hoping time will solve the situation.
- Give themselves opportunities for new relationships and new interests.
- Expect that recovery is two steps forward and one step backward. Recovery does not move ahead in an orderly fashion.
- Recognize that adjustment requires a reformulation of purpose which includes a different relationship with the deceased and a new commitment to the future.
- Explore the solace of religious faith.
- Know and manage the financial situation.
- Limit major decisions about family life or living arrangements until the stress has subsided.
- Do not expect too much of themselves or their children during stressful times.

Helping Children

It is difficult to help a child understand death. There are no simple formulas for accomplishing this task. Helping children is especially hard when parents are upset and have their own difficulties dealing with the death of a loved one. We know children generally react to the event in predictable ways at certain ages, however, which can provide some assurance for parents.

Although children differ, the young child from 3 to 5 usually denies death. They may express sorrow but seem calloused as they run away to play as usual. They think of death as a journey or sleep from which the deceased will return. Words used to explain death should be chosen carefully. A child who is told that grandfather is sleeping may become anxious and fearful at bedtime. Another explanation commonly used is, "God took Grandpa." This, too, can backfire. A child wonders if God might also do that to others and may develop fears that God, at any moment, may take someone else in the family.

As children grow older they appear to be able to accept the finality of death. Between ages 5 and 9 children can accept that a person has died, that they are no longer breathing, and that they will not return to life. By the time children are 9 or 10 they accept the finality of death, realizing that it is inevitable for everyone. This realization, however, seems to be mostly intellectual because most of us do not really confront our eventual death until in the middle years.

Parents differ in their reactions to death and many well-meaning behaviors and interpretations leave children with strange misconceptions. Concerned parents may hide their own grief from children or try to protect them from family mourning and funeral experiences. Children sense that something is wrong and need the reassurance that comes from sharing a family experience. The desire to spare children often in-

tensifies disturbed feelings and increases bewilderment about death.

Some ways to discuss death may allay children's fears about death for themselves, their parents, or friends. Explain that death is usually the result of an accident, illness, or old age. Since children tend to personalize ideas, it is important that they realize that what has happened to Grandpa is not likely to happen to them. "Grandpa was very old, and his body could no longer keep him going." Stress that this happens to everyone's body when it is old. In discussing sickness it can be explained that science has not discovered ways to cure all diseases. An accidental death can be used to emphasize the importance of protecting ourselves from dangerous situations.

How children react to death is often confusing to adults. Some children express sorrow and then seem to go on as though nothing has happened, while others may play-act death with elaborate funeral scenes. Both responses are often hard for adults to accept, but we should be grateful when feelings are being expressed rather than kept inside. Even a funeral for a pet or a dead bird is preparation for later bereavement experiences.

Sometimes children are exposed to other emotional trials when a family member dies. Parents in their own distraught state may give the impression that the deceased person had greater significance than those who survive. The death of a child in the family may bring out parental hostility toward remaining children or the children of others. Unconscious resentment and harsh expectations may be taken out on unsuspecting children who are still alive, active, and healthy.

Another kind of emotional trial for children is the use of a dead parent to make children behave. "Your father would never approve of what you are doing." This is unfair to the child who cannot rebel against a memory and unfair to

the deceased who is being set up as a judgmental tyrant.

More often than we realize children feel that they were somehow responsible for the death. They made noise when the deceased was ill or failed to mow the lawn for Dad. Older children are more apt to talk about their feelings and guilts than younger ones, but children of every age need time to work out their thoughts and to have a ready listener when they are ready to talk.

There is no one way to include children in grieving or funeral ceremonies. Sparing them usually is unwise, as they feel shut out from something terribly important. Being left out leads to a sense of abandonment, which is uncomfortable at any time. Being separated from the family may lead to anxiety that will have further reaching effects than the entire upsetting sadness of the experience.

What is important when children experience death and mourning? Remember that they are children and may not now recognize the full meaning of death, nor its permanence. They cannot react in the same way as an adult, but they too need inclusion, honesty, and loving care, as does any grieving adult.

Thinking Ahead

No one likes to dwell on death, but you should think about ways to cope with the situation.

Decision-making at the time of crisis can be very disorganized. Discussing facts and being aware of legal and financial affairs will make decisions easier when death comes.

- 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?
- Do you have a will?
- What immediate financial assistance will be forthcoming?

Suggested Reading

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