

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Rethinking Family Dynamics in the Aftermath of Loss

Dealing with the death of someone in your family can be a devastating experience—for everyone involved. You have all lost someone who was a part of you. It can take years to come to terms with such a loss. Because a death in the family is a deep personal loss for everyone, the strain on family life can be enormous.

Responding to Death

A death in the family does not have to lead to a family crisis. A family crisis is a secondary problem created by poor adaptation to the changes in family life caused by the death. Such a crisis can take different forms. For instance, your teenage son may suddenly take his friends joyriding in the family car. He doesn't have a license, and has been drinking. Or, consider that a nasty letter arrives from the bank because your mortgage payment was late for the third month in a row. Your unpaid bills are now piling up.

In the above examples, by dealing with grief through the use of drugs and alcohol, or by trying to ignore the family's new financial circumstance, the family members are demonstrating that they're having problems adapting to the recent death. And as a result, the family, as a whole, needs help.

The Family System

Your family, as well as being a collection of different people, is also a system. As with any system, your family tends to take on its own life and its own characteristics. Traits to understand about the family system, when it comes to the death of one of its members include:

- Anything that affects the individual members of your family, affects your family as a whole.
- When your family system is thrown out of balance, it automatically seeks to rebalance itself.

A family crisis occurs when the family fails to re-balance itself, or fails to re-balance in a positive way. Crisis happens because the old family structures have broken down, and the new demands that a death places on the family are too much for the family to deal with.

To avoid a crisis, a family has to improve its ability to solve problems. These may include financial, social and emotional problems. To solve the problems associated with a family member's death, a family has to develop strength in maintaining strong communication.

Communication in Your Family

A family functions better if it communicates well. This is particularly true when the family is going through grief together. Grieving together as a family involves dealing with the personality and needs of each member of the family at a time when the family is being forced to change.

During family grief, everyone is under pressure. A lot of pain is accumulating under one roof, and it shows in different ways. The atmosphere can be volatile or depressed—or both. For instance, a series of arguments can flare up between two family members, while during the same time period, another family

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member becomes more and more withdrawn, hardly talking to anyone, sleeping all the time or becoming careless of their appearance.

Remember, everyone in the family had a special and unique relationship with the person who died. Keep in mind that all the members of the family are dealing with different issues of grief, given their place in the family and their stage in life. Communicating heals the individuals in the family, and it heals the family as a whole.