



Changes in Family Relationships Following Death

When a family member dies, relationships change within the family. There is someone missing, an empty chair at the table, a role unfilled, future plans forever altered. When the person who died is a parent leaving a spouse and adult children, often the attention in the family turns to the remaining parent. Adult children may worry about the remaining parent, who is all the more precious because of the death. The grief for the death of the first parent is sometimes postponed until the second parent dies. There can be tension among the adult children if the responsibilities for caregiving are perceived to have been more heavily placed on one of the children, who then may feel taken for granted. Wills can cause real stress when family members feel the will was unfair to one or more family members. Grief can come out as anger for some family members, which causes further problems in family relationships and communication.

When both parents have died there can be a large shift in family relationships. Often communication in families goes through, originates from, or is about the parents. When the parents are gone, the adult children can be so busy with their lives that there is less communication and sharing among them. Sometimes one family member takes on the role of the family organizer, arranging for family get-togethers at holidays and other times, and facilitating communication among members. Other families may drift apart as adult children focus on their own families or avoid addressing difficult and often-times longstanding conflict and emotions.

When an adult child in a family dies there is often survivor guilt on the part of parents, who may feel it is out of the normal order of things for a child to pre-decease the parents. Differences in grief patterns according to generation or gender can lead to tension. The older generation is often more accepting of death as a natural part of life and more apt to “pull themselves up and get on with life,” while younger generations may have more of a need to express feelings and talk about their grief. If some family members remember only the good things about the deceased, this can cause resentment in other family members.

When a young child dies, the stress on the family system is intense. Mothers and fathers tend to grieve differently and are not always able to support one another. The loss of future dreams, seeing the child’s friends go through developmental milestones, processing the grief of other children in the family, as well as having to answer the question, “How many children do you have?”, often tax the coping skills of parents. Grief support through individual counseling and group counseling with other bereaved parents may be very helpful.

Time does not heal all wounds, but letting time pass and letting everyone adjust to the death and changes in family relationships is a good way to start coping. At the time of death family members are stressed and exhausted; giving everyone time and space to recover can reduce tension. Seek support from friends, extended family, spiritual communities, and hospice bereavement counselors. Everyone grieves in his or her own way and in his or her own time; getting support from outside the family can help with your own unique grief needs.