

COPING AS A FAMILY

Communication is the key to coping and growing as a family through grief. It is important to be together to talk, cry, rage, or even sit in silence. At the same time there should be respect for each family member's way of handling his or her grief. Some family members will prefer to grieve privately, others openly, and others a combination of these two styles. In many ways each family member must grieve alone. Here are some suggestions to help with family grief:

Continue to give attention and time to your present family members when you are together. Let them know that you love them.

Maintain your balance of attention between the family member who died and surviving family members. Surviving children often feel that a child who died is more important than they are.

Try to be sensitive to each other's feelings. Feelings are often difficult to verbalize. Listen to what is meant as well as to what is said.

Hugs or a pat on the back give comfort and a sense of closeness.

It may be helpful to set aside time to be "alone together" as a family or to even hold family meetings. Encourage but don't pressure family members to talk about and express grief in their own way. Be a good listener.

At some point it is important to leave your home even for brief period of time. Try to plan family projects or trips to get away from your home, even if just to a different town nearby.

Make a "family diary" in which each family member may contribute memories or thoughts through writing or drawing. You may want to make a collage together.

Be careful not to give each other the silent treatment. Make sure the person who has died continues to be a part of the family conversations.

Respect the life stages of various family members; an adolescent might gravitate towards peers in coping with grief. Teens rarely talk with parents about their grief unless they are forced to in a family session. As long as they are talking to someone about their pain, they will be okay.

Discuss your loved one's role in the family and how each family member may have a new role now that your loved one is gone. Be careful not to expect a family member to replace or to be the same as the member who died (expecting a young boy whose father died to be the "man of the house" or a son whose sibling died to be like that sibling in schoolwork, sports, etc.) Discuss what will be missed and irreplaceable.

If depression, withdrawal, grief, or family problems are getting out of control, seek professional help.

Recognize that anniversaries, birthdays, and special holidays will be difficult for the family and each member of the family. Discuss together how to observe these occasions. Should there be a variation on traditional celebrations? Do any family members have particular concerns or suggestions?

Consult family members on the disposition of the your loved one's possessions, including his or her room. Take your time and tread carefully where these precious mementos are concerned. If possible, put off making major decisions about moving and giving away possessions until you are completely ready.

Studies show that a bereaved person's esteem can be very low. Survivors should work on their image of themselves and help each family member to think and feel good about themselves. This includes getting exercise, keeping all doctor appointments including dentist and eye appointments, eating right, resting, and looking your best when you can.

Remember - it is difficult to help your family if you are falling apart. Working on your own grief will eventually enable you to help your family to cope with their grief. You will need to find a balance between helping others and taking time for your own grief.

As a family or individually, pray or talk to your loved one who has died to help the family cope with their grief.

Also discuss dreams you have about your loved one. They unite family members and often dispel fears or worries we have.

If you can learn to share your grief as a family, you will grow as a family.

From "Hope For the Bereaved" by Therese S. Schoeneck