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Whenever a family member dies, there is a process that a healthy family undergoes in response to the loss of one of its own. This process is called “role reorganization.” It occurs because the family needs to get itself back into the rhythm and balance that was lost when the family member died. Many times families are not even consciously aware of what they are doing, but it is a critically important process nonetheless.

The family is a system in which the sum (the family) is more than the total of its parts (the family members). This means that the family is more than merely a collection of its individual people. It is above and beyond this. The family system is something which takes on its own life and its own characteristics and does not just reflect the individuals within it.

There are two important principles in family systems. The first principle is that anything that affects your family will affect its individual members, and anything that affects the individual members will affect the family. If a family is distressed because one of its members is seriously ill, this will affect all of its members. For instance, the father may be preoccupied when he tries to function normally at work. Conversely, if work problems are distressing the father, it will affect the family, because he will be acting differently due to his concerns over problems at work.

The second principle concerns balance. Like any other system, your family works to maintain itself on an even keel; it struggles to maintain its equilibrium. To keep the family functioning on track, each family develops specific roles for each person and establishes rules, communication patterns, family expectations, and patterns of behavior which keep the family operating in a consistent and stable fashion. They are determined by that particular family’s beliefs, values, ways of coping, and relationships within the family.

The methods of keeping a family operating as smoothly as possible differ from family to family. What might work for your family may be totally wrong for another. Each family has its own unique and characteristic style. Having set ways of doing things does not mean that the family is without problems. It merely means that the family and its problems most probably will continue to operate in the same old ways unless something forces them to change.

Like systems, families require the ongoing support of each individual component (family member) to keep the system operating in balance. When an element is added or taken away, the system becomes unbalanced and there is a struggle to reach balance again. Therefore, whenever anything changes in the usual and customary ways in which a particular family operates, whether because of problems inside the family (for example, the death of a member) or outside of it (for example, external stress put on the family), the family must know how to compensate for these changes. It is similar to a balance scale, where if something is added to one side it alters the other side by the same amount in the opposite direction. If the scale is ever to become balanced again, something must be added to one side or subtracted from the other. When the family experiences some type or degree of change, it, too, must adjust itself to accommodate to that change and get back into equilibrium.

What does all of this information on family dynamics have to do with grief? Very simply, it helps us to understand what happens—indeed, what must happen—in families after somebody dies. When a member of your family dies and no longer can fulfill his assigned roles or obligations, there is a shift in the balance of your family. One element has been removed and the entire family system is thrown into disequilibrium; something has to change. Your family focuses on reestablishing balance in the system. This will affect not only the family as a whole and its individual members, but also the various relationships that exist within the family. Power, responsibilities and roles will be reassigned as a result of

the family's struggle to reestablish stability in the face of your loved one's death Your family's unique ways of functioning determine how it will respond to the demands for change.

Some of the reassigned roles and responsibilities are easy to see. Everyone in your family has a number of obvious roles to play to help the family run smoothly. For example, if the one who died is the one who cooked all the meals, then someone else will have to be reassigned that chore. Or, if the one who died is the one who always took out the garbage, someone is going to have to assume that responsibility or else the house will become a dump This is what is known as "role reorganization" —roles are reorganized and reassigned to different people in order that essential family functions can be carried on to ensure that the family continues to operate.

Some roles and responsibilities are not so clearly apparent. They may or may not be explicitly assigned, but all family members know that they exist. This is seen, for example, in the case of the family "troublemaker." This is the person who constantly gets into trouble. Everyone pays attention to him instead of looking at the more upsetting problems in the family. Very often a child will take on this role and serve the purpose of taking attention away from one or both of the parents' problems. If this child dies, someone else in the family will have to cause trouble if the family wants to keep the focus off the real issues. If this does not happen, and if the customary methods of keeping things running in the same old way do not work, the family is thrown way out of balance and suffers severe problems. This does not happen only where there is a negative role such as "troublemaker" to be reassigned. It happens as well when there are positive roles left unfulfilled by a family member's death.

After your family member dies, the degree of role reorganization that will be necessary depends on the number and types of roles that particular family member fulfilled. For example in traditional families, if the person who dies is the father, chances are that there are a large number of roles to reassign if the family is to function. Among others, these could include the roles of provider, protector, maintenance man, and the numerous roles inherent in being a husband and a father. Additionally, each role has its own nature, meaning, and role-fulfilling aspects that will be different to individual family members. This means that what one child needs to fill in for her father will be different from what another child needs. The family needs someone to assume the father's functional roles, but the individual family members will need more than that depending upon the nature of the personal relationships severed by the death. In contrast, if an infant dies, there will be fewer roles to reassign in order for the family to function. However, don't look solely at mere number of roles. The role of being the infant and embodying parental hopes and expectations, and of being the object of love and focus of family attention, is a critical one, and its absence can strike at the heart of a family, even though the family is more affected behaviorally by the death of the father.

Suffice it to say that in each family the deceased's roles will need to be fulfilled in some way, or the family will be thrown out of kilter. Sometimes this ends up being a positive thing, because the family may go for help and/or find new ways of functioning that are better than before. Yet, many times problems just continue unabated. In either case, whether it is or isn't resolved healthily or successfully, the period of reorganization prompted by a family member's death is most stressful for all concerned.

Lastly, you should be aware of the serious consequences of roles that are not reassigned suitably to family members. If you give someone a role that is inappropriate for them (for example, expect a child to take on her deceased sister's personality), inconsistent with their preparation (for example, ask a little boy to be the "man" around the house), or incompatible with current roles (for example, you expect the mother to be home with the children and at work simultaneously), you are only asking for further problems. New role assignments can constitute either secondary losses (for example, the person is robbed of his identity) or secondary gains (for example, the person finally gets some recognition that formerly may have been withheld) for individual family members.

In role reorganization you must evaluate not only what roles need to be reassigned but also whether the reassignment is as healthy as possible for all involved. It will be important to keep in mind that each bereaved family member has to cope both with the complexities of the grief process itself and with an altered, out-of-balance system and new role responsibilities and demands.

Special Family System Issues in Grief A problem that can complicate the family reorganization process stems from the volatility of the grieving family and the need for compromise among family members in their grief. Both issues arise because of the very special nature of the family system.

The “multiplier effect” exists in all families. This is when the grief of one member triggers the grief of another. Having so many acutely grieving people under one roof is such an intense situation that, at times, it is a wonder that the whole situation does not blow up with the accumulation of grief and pain. In contrast, at other times, the presence of a sense of community, shared loss, and strength in numbers is quite comforting and supportive.

Family members must recognize the necessity to weigh the needs of a particular family member versus the needs of the family as a whole. A delicate balance must be struck. For instance, what should be done when one member finds it too upsetting to look at the photographs of the deceased that the rest of the family wants to hang on the wall. How should the family respond when two out of the six members find it too painful to put up the Christmas tree, but the others need to put it up. Yet it is not right for family members to hide their grief in an attempt to protect one another or promote false unity. This will only fuel the volatility, increase the chances for communication problems and unmet needs, and force the grieving underground, adding to the potential for unresolved grief.

There are no right or wrong answers in these situations; families must learn to compromise. There is the best chance for success in this if communication among your family members can be open and honest, each person’s needs are recognized as being just as legitimate and important as everyone else’s, and there is a commitment to the survival of the family, with compromise valued and assurance that in other situations one’s needs will take precedence.

As with married couples who have lost a child, family members must not expect each other to have the same needs, to grieve in similar fashion along an identical course, or to assume that each has lost the same relationship. They must allow for personal differences, recognizing that the individual factors of each particular person’s grief will influence that person’s reaction to the death more than will her presumed similarity to other family members, or the fact that they all have lost the same person. Lastly, family members will need to understand that while their closeness may be supportive in their grief, it also can make them likely to displace blame, anger, and other hostile feelings onto one another, to avoid communication for fear of upsetting the other, or to place irrational demands on each other. As a family, and as individuals, your family members will need to minimize this as much as possible, be gentle and patient with one another, and have the proper perspective on what grieving the death of your loved one will mean.

After a family member dies, the surviving family must reorganize itself to survive and must cope with the stresses of containing different grievers, each with diverse, idiosyncratic needs. It is a mammoth task.