

How Families Mourn Together

Glenn Brynes, Ph.D., M.D.

Carol E. Watkins, M.D.

In order to understand bereavement, we need to make the distinction between grief and mourning. Grief is a person's internal experience, thoughts and feelings related to the experience of a great loss. Mourning is the external expression of one's grief. Thus, a person may experience extremely painful grief but, because of a need to appear stoic, may not mourn.

Grief and mourning are intensely personal and unique experiences. We often refer to stages of grief, but these often do not occur in an orderly progression. Depending on the situation and the individuals involved, one may not experience some stages, or may cycle in and out of the same emotional state several times.

A major loss often brings up echoes of past losses. If the family members still have intense unresolved grief, it may complicate the way that they mourn..

Loss often happens in a family context. The family members grieve and mourn individually and as a group. The method of death, sudden or the culmination of a long illness is an important factor. A sudden or violent death may be particularly difficult for the family to process because of the intense anger often involved. "It didn't have to happen." However even if the death is the long expected release from a painful illness, it can still be a powerful experience.

If a parent dies, the children may experience a double loss. One parent has died and the other is too overwhelmed to provide much nurturance. At this time, extended family and the community can step in to support the grieving family.

Marriages may be strained and even fall apart under the strain of death and mourning. Spouses may grieve differently and may resent the way that the partner behaves. Each may be too overwhelmed to reach out to the other.

Those in non-traditional family structures may face additional complexities in their process of mourning. They may be denied legal protection afforded to other families. Church and extended family may not recognize their grief.

Mourning, though a painful process can also be a way for families to grow together. Petty conflicts seem less important in the face of loss. Relationships seem more precious because they are fragile and impermanent. Family members may learn to support each other and truly listen.