

Coping as a Family

Grief shows up in families in different ways—including conflict, discomfort, and frustration. We often seek support from family during stressful times, so it can be especially difficult to grieve amidst familial conflict. While grief will never be easy or tidy, these five principles can help a family orient itself:

1) Respect different forms of grief. There is no perfect grief process. But in a family full of people processing a loss, members might wonder if their individual mourning style is “correct.” Individuals may compare their grief response to their family members’, and feel guilt for or judgment of others’ responses.

Give yourself space to grieve in your own way and your family members space to grieve in theirs. Respect the family member that seems wrapped up in the practical details for the aftermath; that may be their form of self-care. Respect the stoic family member, the silent family member, and the laughing family member. We cannot know each other’s internal world, and there are many ways to heal. If somebody’s form of grieving brings up discomfort for you, notice it and perhaps leave the room. Avoid making a person feel bad about their grief response, as long as it does not hurt others.

2) Respect different paces of grief. For some, grief overtakes the mourner immediately following a loss. For others, the enormity of what occurred may not sink in for weeks or even months. In the event of a death after a chronic illness, family members may begin grieving before the death occurs, while others only absorb the news when the individual dies. People’s brains process loss and absence different and at different paces.

3) Make room for feelings. Part of respect different forms of grief is making room for each others’ feelings. If you’re a parent, remind your children that it’s okay to feel sad and it’s okay not to understand and it’s okay if they feel okay. Be the family member that makes room for different experiences. Grief is confusing, and nobody knows exactly how it should look. If you’re in a mental space to check in with others, do so. Permission to feel complicated, messy feelings is vital to the healing process.

4) Set boundaries. Know what you can give, even if it's nothing at all right now. It is vitally important to remember that family members may not be able to meet all of each other's needs at all times. While family support can provide solace, some may feel incapable of helping others through their pain.

We must care for ourselves before caring for others, and we do nobody any favors if we deplete ourselves. If approached by a family member seeking support, it is okay to tell that person, "I can see how deeply you're hurting. I'm hurting too. I want to be here for you, but I don't have the emotional capacity right now."

5) Seek outside help. Seeking professional help is a normal and healthy way to work through a loss. A counselor is equipped to help a person work through grief at that person's pace. Support groups can help to provide different perspectives in a non-threatening, safe space.

Grief is messy and uneven, cascading through families in unpredictable ways. But when families make room for grief in all its forms, they create an environment that honors the process.

*If you have questions or concerns about the grieving process,
or would like to access formal support
please give us a call at (716) 836-6460.*