

Grief Notes

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Navigating Family Conflict in Grief by Jane Cornman, Bereavement Coordinator

Say the word “family” and all sorts of images come to mind. There are strong, mutually supportive families, families that struggle with conflict and broken relationships, and non-biological families that people make when their biological families are not available to them. Regardless of the flavor of your family, you may be taken by surprise by how the death of a loved one affects it.

We all make assumptions that seem logical. Strong, supportive families may assume that they can look to each other for mutual support and understanding since they’re all grieving the same person. Conflicted families may assume that the death of a person at the center of the conflict will help fix it. In some cases, these assumptions are true. But more often, families find themselves struggling with some common challenges that can stir up conflict. These include:

- Disagreement about how end-of-life decisions were handled
- Hard feelings about disparities in end-of-life caregiving workload
- Old disagreements sprouting back up when the family referee has died
- Having to renegotiate the details of traditional family gatherings such as holidays, birthdays, anniversaries, and vacations
- Disagreements about how to write the obituary, plan the funeral, or divide the estate and sentimental items
- Changing roles within the family system now that one of the members is missing.
- People with different grieving styles, grieving the same death differently
- Unfinished business with the person who died

While these challenges can be alarming, there are some simple principles that can help.

First, it’s important to understand that this type of conflict is very normal and common in grief. You and your family can get through it, although it may feel rocky for a while.

Second, it is important to remember that the only thing you can change is YOU. Try to focus on how you can cope best with how people are behaving, rather than trying to change how they are behaving.

Third, be committed to your own healing and getting your needs met. Trying to engage in a difficult situation when you are compromised can often make things worse.

Fourth, if a relationship that you value is being stretched, try to have compassion for the other person. They may also be hurting, and their perspective feels as legitimate to them as yours does to you.

Finally, look outside of your family for grief support. Working with a neutral, trustworthy, and understanding therapist or grief support specialist, or joining a grief support group, will enable you to get your needs met and help you cope better with your family’s challenges.

As always, if you are struggling with any aspect of your loss, our bereavement coordinators are here for you. Please reach out and take advantage of the support that we can provide!