

## Treatment of Children Upon the Death of their Parent\*

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*For it is not enough, after a bereavement, to strive for the achievement of a previous level of functioning. That would render one capable of functioning well on the old basis, with a spouse or with a parent. In actuality, the bereaved person must surpass the former level of functioning in order to be able to survive successfully without the support and interplay with the person who died.*

DEATH of a parent is part of the Dnormative life cycle situation, but whether one's parent dies when one is ten or sixty years old, it is a painful experience which instantly forces one into the position of being one generation older. How this affects one and how one copes with it are a function of age, developmental stage, relationship to that person, and personal dynamics.

Every child who loses a parent may not need treatment. If needed, what kind of treatment? Individual, family, therapy group, peer support group? What are the presenting problems? They range from depression, loss of ability to concentrate, to a complaint of the remaining parent that the child never talks about the dead parent. Will treatment relieve the symptoms? If so, how? What helps? What is therapeutic?

At Westchester Jewish Community Services all the above mentioned modalities of treatment are available in our Bereavement Center. We have formed a large mutual support group (about 200 members) for widows and widowers. They range in ages from the late 20's to the late 60's. It is through them that we learned what their and their family needs are. A death is a

family affair; a family affair which is complicated by the fact that each family member grieves differently. It is therefore important that each family member not only be permitted to grieve in his or her own way, but also that they all have some understanding of each others' feelings.

The mourning process takes many months and is *not* as linear as some people seem to think. Elizabeth Kubler Ross' stages of attitudes toward death deal with attitudes of *terminally ill patients*, but have often been erroneously used as stages of bereavement. These are: shock, disbelief, denial, pain, sadness, depression, guilt, anger, acceptance and adjustment, and resolution. While shock always comes first and resolution comes last, the other stages are all intertwined. The feelings accompanying these phases come and go in constantly recurring waves. This can be very disturbing to a grieving widowed person who reports: "I was doing so well, I thought I had really adjusted, I actually was able to go through weeks without crying. Then suddenly I felt terribly depressed again." It is necessary to understand these ever changing feelings and moods in the context of the individual's defense mechanism, and in the context of the person's relationship to the deceased. For example, if a widowed person goes to a party or theatre and has a good time, it may

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evoke feelings of disloyalty or guilt. If a child has a good time at a party, he will probably not have such feelings at all. As a result, the child may view a parent's mourning as excessive and a parent may think that the child is not mourning sufficiently. In order to function well as a family we must promote an atmosphere of permissiveness and understanding of such differences. More specific case history examples will follow.

Our first objective, however, is the individual's struggle with the pain and reality of his situation so that he can accept them fully. Reinhold Niebuhr wrote:

God grant me the SERENITY to accept things I cannot change, COURAGE to change the things I can, and WISDOM to know the difference.

Acceptance doesn't come easily. When we are told that someone died, our first reaction is usually denial and disbelief which linger for a long time, even after we can accept the fact on an intellectual level. How much more difficult this must be for children whose concept of reality is not as firmly established and is strongly challenged by magical thinking. So while the widow may say "I know he is not coming back, but it doesn't seem real" the child may be thinking, "If I am a good boy, daddy will come back."

The first and most important way we can help children begin to face the reality of a parent's death is to have them literally "face it," have the child visit the parent in the hospital, later tell the child of the death, let him see the pain and the tears of others, let him go to the funeral and witness the actual burial.

Difficult as this may be for the child, it will be easier for him in years to come. Some of our bereaved children

have told us how much they resented not being "part of the family" at the time of the funeral, not being told the truth, not being permitted to attend the funeral. They were left with the feeling of abandonment by the dead and the living, as well as with a pervasive feeling of unreality. In addition, there sometimes arises the issue of viewing the body. In cases where this is a religious or family custom, we feel that the child should be permitted to view the body with the other family members, so that he is part of the family and not excluded. While this may frighten and upset the child and may leave him with that last mental image of the dead parent for a long time, eventually the child will be able to recall his parent the way he looked when he was alive. I add that if the child does not want to view the body, he should not be forced. When the death of a parent is unexpected and sudden, the child will have more difficulty in accepting it.

In order of immediate importance, the next issue is that of the child's fears: some of the children in our groups have shared the terrible fears they had of their parent being buried alive; "what if he wakes up and cannot get out?" Another fear is the horror at the thought of the disintegration of the body in the grave. The fear that they (the children) in some way caused the parent to die is common. One little three year-old thought that "daddy went away because I was not a good boy and he is angry at me." Another boy was convinced, and lived with that fear and guilt for many months (until he shared this with the group), that something he did in washing the family car caused the crash which killed his father. This boy, even at age ten, still had strong feelings of his own omnipotence. Children who share these feelings call them "crazy thoughts." They

know the thoughts are unrealistic, but they each still had them and needed to air and share them.

Some other quite realistic concerns of the children are: "Can we stay in the same house or apartment?" "Can I still go to camp, school or college?" "Where will the money come from?" or "If my parent was healthy and could die, so could I!"

Most frightening is the thought of the possibility of the remaining parent dying. And it *does* happen! We had several such tragedies. The one we were most deeply involved in was the family in which the father died leaving a wife and two teenage children. Within two years the widow developed cancer and she died one year later. The widow and both the children had been attending our bereaved parents and children's groups and were also seen in individual treatment and our agency provided them with daily homemaker service for a period of two years—until this past summer—when the children sold the house and both went away to college.

Such innermost thoughts and fears do not usually surface easily. We encourage the adults to promote the kind of trust and empathy which will create an environment conducive to this kind of communication. Especially in families in which such communication does not take place, it is most beneficial for the children to be in a group of peers who have had similar experiences.

Where a parent is not able to show, express and tolerate his own grief and pain, the children will certainly not be able to deal with these emotions. For Jonathan, age fourteen, whose mother was screaming at him, "control yourself" his answer was, "I will control myself, when *you* control yourself."

Parents who are members of the young widows & widowers groups learn to accept their own feelings and be-

come much more sensitive to their children's needs.

Mrs. P. could not bring herself to say, "My husband died." It was as though, if she said it, it would really be true. Not surprisingly, neither could her twelve year-old tell anyone that his father died. Mrs. P. reported that she had gone with her son to buy him his Bar Mitzvah suit. The salesman sold them the suit and said that the following week they will choose the tie and then "Your daddy can teach you how to tie it." Neither Mrs. P. nor William acknowledged this statement. Mrs. P. wanted the salesman to teach William how to tie the tie, but could not get the words out of her mouth. Once she was helped to see that her own avoidance and denial were keeping William from accepting reality, she did bring herself to tell the salesman that William's father died and would he please teach the boy to do his own tie. Not only did the salesman do it, he shared with William the fact that his own father died when he was fourteen and that he knew how difficult it is to grow up without a father. This was a definite turning point in Mrs. P's personal progress. The Bar Mitzvah was celebrated with joy and pride; with some sadness but a great deal of affirmation of life and future for all the surviving members of the family.

Children are frequently frightened by the grief and crying. They will say, and often with great anger, "You are no fun anymore." "You always cry." or simply "stop it already." It is then necessary for the mother to explain to the child that "Mommy is not falling apart" that her fears and grief are natural and appropriate and to acknowledge the fact that this may be painful for the child to witness, then, as much as possible, seek privacy at such times. One of our widows, a mother of three little boys, told us she used to be the "cleanest woman in the world" after her husband died. She took showers several times a day, because that was the only place in which she could cry freely.

On the other extreme, some parents have reported to us that their children

do not grieve at all. This may or may not be true.

Marvin came to our "newly widowed" group and proceeded to tell us that his wife died two months before; he feels shattered, devastated, tearful, and broken, but his twelve year-old daughter is "just fine." She is "over it" he said. She is doing well in school, sees her friends a lot, helps in the house, cooks, etc. Other members of the group attempted to convince him that his daughter couldn't be "over it" in such a short time. Marvin persisted in his belief. Since this is an open-ended group and I had no way of knowing whether I'd ever see Marvin again, and was concerned about his little girl, I decided to be a bit confronting. I asked him what he thought his daughter would tell me if I asked her how her father was doing. He said that she would probably tell me her father was doing "just fine." Then I said to him, "isn't it just possible that she is just as shattered and devastated as you are and that you are both putting up brave, false fronts?" Marvin said an unconvincing "maybe", but called us two months later for help for himself and his daughter who was deeply depressed and suddenly couldn't cope with school.

In some rare instances we hear of children who were not permitted to grieve or cry. Such is the story of a young woman whose mother died when she was a child. Her father forbade crying. The young woman didn't cry then and she cannot cry now. She lives her life according to what she thinks her mother's desires for her were, and she writes sad poetry. How much better off she would have been had she been helped to feel, cry, mourn. She might have been able to live a life more of her own choosing, not one she assumes her mother wished for her . . . and perhaps her poetry would not all have had to be sad.

A short time after the death of a parent, the family begins to regroup. There seems to be a drive to fill the empty space. Either mommy begins the impossible task of trying to be both mother and father, or daddy tries the

same, or one of the children, usually the oldest son, attempts to become the head of the family. When a mother dies, a daughter will frequently try to become a housewife and mother to her father and to her siblings. This is a futile process. It simply does not work. The burden, though self-imposed by some children at first, becomes too heavy to bear. By that time, the remaining parent has learned to depend on the child too much and will resent it if the child stops performing the extra duties he took upon himself.

We had a client with a twenty three year-old son, a school dropout, who upon his father's death, considered himself the new family head and sporadically made the gesture of paying some family bills, needing this to affirm the position he thought he had to fill. The conflict within him as well as with his mother was tremendous. The mother had to learn to take on the responsibility for herself, her three children and the house. She then was able to make an agreement with the son which specified exactly how much money he was expected to contribute toward his own upkeep at home and made it clear to him that she (and not the son) was the family head.

In families with younger children the issues are usually those of extra responsibilities in terms of household chores. In families in which these are clearly spelled out, they all cope quite well. Where the single parent tries to become supermom or superpop, we usually see them within two years with ulcers or other physical problems plus behavioral problems with their children.

Still, general rules are difficult to set. They have to be worked out by each family for their own needs and survival. In some cases we see women who are so deeply affected by the death of a husband that they simply cannot cook and take care of their children. They resent the burden, they are frightened

of the future, are not sure they will be able to cope. In these cases we help them with their mourning process while restructuring their lives so that they retain sufficient motivation and energy to fulfill their role as a mother. In other cases, the widow will state that she really would rather not be alive—she would prefer to “end it all” but for her responsibility to her children. In the early stages of bereavement this is as good a rationalization as any for trying to survive and cope. We will carefully monitor this type of client and as soon as some *joie de vivre* returns, we will try to help her to begin to enjoy daily life and to admit to herself that she, in fact, wants to live and deserves as good a life as she can make it. Such attitudes on the part of the parents which result in either child neglect or making children one’s reason for living profoundly affect the children’s behavior and their self-image. The shorter the duration of such situations, the easier it is to remedy and change them.

It must be stressed that the adult’s depression has tremendous effects on children. We see parents who have their small children sleep with them. They report that this is the only way they can soothe the child, but often a contrary motive pertains: this is the covert way the surviving parent soothes him or herself, unwittingly using the child. In cases of little boys or little girls in oedipal phases of their development, the harm may be severe in terms of development of sexual identity.

So far we have been dealing mostly with family issues and how the mourning of the remaining parent affects the child. What about the child’s mourning? Many authorities have felt that children are not capable of mourning. This is, in fact, true of very young children up to age five who are not sufficiently differentiated and do not

have their own separateness and identification. They do grieve, they are in pain. They cry bitterly and complain “it is not fair.” They miss the deceased, but they cannot complete the mourning process which implies a conscious effort at accepting reality and regaining autonomy and self-esteem. The word “death” has not much meaning to such a young child. He has insufficient cognitive development to understand the concept of “forever” or “never”. He is capable of limited abstract thought, but the concept of death is not yet fully integrated. One five year-old, two months after his father’s death, said, “Daddy has been dead long enough, he can come home now.” It is not a good idea (unless this is the family’s firm religious conviction) to tell such young children that “God took daddy” or that “Daddy is in heaven.” If the child cannot understand abstractions such as “death” or “forever”, how can we expect him to comprehend the concept of “God” or “heaven” which are abstract and religious concepts? Children who are told of God and heaven, especially in families which are not extremely religious, become angry at God and often wish to go to heaven themselves. In cases of such young children, it is even harder when it is the mother who dies because she was the nurturer and the partner in symbiosis.

Where the child’s ego is not sufficiently developed, the child will defend against the pain by using denial and avoidance. Such defenses often remain part of the dynamics of adults who suffered a loss in childhood. The loss of a love object in childhood is a narcissistic injury which results in damage to self-esteem and may be life-long.

Death of a parent during latency and adolescence will evoke progressively more capability for adult type of mourning. These children will still over-idealize the dead parent and they fre-

quently displace their anger at the surviving parent. It is important to note that the children's normal mourning process is actually similar to the pathological adult mourning process: they use defenses that avoid, displace, deny, over-identify and over-idealize the dead person.

Once a child is old enough to work through ambivalences, the work of mourning begins to resemble that of the adults. Memories are retained, the anger and sadness leave, then the energy is released for full acceptance of reality and for personal growth.

When Richard was twelve-and-a-half, six months after his father died, he told his mother that he didn't want to continue his Hebrew studies and would not go through with the mother's Bar Mitzvah plans for him. If his father couldn't be there, he certainly was not going through all this for his mother. He was clearly angry. He knew how much this Bar Mitzvah meant to his mother. Mrs. R. brought this problem to the group. "What should I do? Richard absolutely refuses to go through with it." The opinions of the group members were diverse: "So don't have a Bar Mitzvah." "Make a small one." "Postpone it for a year." "Force him." Mrs. R's problem was that she was not used to making decisions. She was not comfortable in the new role of family head and she needed others to make the decision for her—even if it meant Richard who would make the decision. I then questioned her as to her family's religious customs and adherences. It seems that not have a Bar Mitzvah was an unprecedented and unthinkable thing. "So" said I, "is a Bar Mitzvah a negotiable thing in your family?" She replied, "Certainly not!" She now realized what she was giving up. Richard's attitude was a reflection of his feelings towards his mother. Richard was feeling angry at his mother and had ambivalent feelings about his father.

Some people have felt that the mourning process of bereaved children and that of children of divorce are similar. It is true that the working through of ambivalence has to be accomplished in both situations. The other phases, though similar in terms

of coping with a crisis, are very different. The child of divorce does not usually lose totally a love object, does not have to deal with the concept of eternity or the finality of death. The acceptance of this finality is extremely painful for adults as well as the children. As one nine year-old girl said to her mother, "You can always have another husband, I can never have another father."

Children can be fiercely protective of their relationships with their deceased parent. Children over age five generally don't want a "new" mommy or daddy. They resent it when the surviving parent begins to date. We have found it helpful to have the parent explain to the child that dating is a social and personal need of the parent and does not threaten or diminish the value or memory of the dead parent. Should a marriage take place, the person will be the parent's spouse—not necessarily the child's new mother or father. Under such conditions it is possible for a family to function well, both in cases or parents dating as well as in blended families.

The memory of the dead parent must not only be respected, it should be nurtured and encouraged. Through these memories we immortalize the dead and validate the parts of ourselves with which we identify with them. This is true for adults as well as for children. There are some who claim that mourning is never entirely completed, that throughout life we have the need to memorialize the dead person. It is certainly true in Jewish religious belief and practice.

The Jewish tradition of unveilings is another traumatic event in the life of the family. The stone must be ordered and the remaining parent often involves the children in the selection. The anticipation is almost as bad as the actual ceremony. The family stand-

ing at the gravesite is faced with the reality of the loss. It is now literally written in stone. A stone which is a cruel reminder of dead objects. It puts things in perspective and acts as a symbol through which generations know each other. "An unveiling," people report, "is like a second funeral"—the rabbi or cantor again chants the *kaddish* and the *El Moleh Rachamim*, the Jewish faith is reaffirmed and so is the Jewish identity.

But more than in religious customs, we tend to have other "anniversary reactions"—birthdays, holidays, Mother's Day, Father's Day. These are times which are extremely painful and anxiety-producing during the mourning process, often becoming nostalgic, benign, sometimes even pleasant as years go by.

In the beginning, however, the first Father's Day is an excruciating milestone in the life of a child whose father died. Some children refuse to tell the teacher of the death. They go through the motions of making Father's Day gifts for their dead fathers. Some refuse to go to see their grandfathers. Some want to ignore the day completely. At Westchester Jewish Community Services we have found one solution: we get a number of parents and children together for an all day picnic/swim party. The wonderful and poignant part of celebrating Father's Day in this way is that the children are in the company of others who have had the same experience and they can talk about it. They often become a little tearful, speculate on what they would have bought their fathers as a gift if they were alive. They also have a lot of fun and are gathering new memories to build on.

This article has referred chiefly to death of a father. The reason is statistical: two out of every three children who lose a parent before the age of

eighteen lose a father. In families where the mother died, we have noted a strong new intimacy and attachment between the fathers and sons. They spend more time together and the common grief seems to permit a close, constructive, male friendship.

The relationship between daughters and fathers, after the death of a mother, also becomes closer, but is often complicated by the girls trying to assume the mother's role. Girls also seem to be very possessive and jealous of their fathers. It is, however, easier for the girls to develop good relationships with mature women in the family or former friends of their mothers. This does not seem to be equally true of boys.

At Westchester Jewish Community Services we prefer to work with entire families, but when this is not possible, we work through the parents in the expectation children will benefit in the end. Both parents and children have a safe place where they get in touch with their feelings, share them, be understood, be helped, and be in a position to help others. For it is not enough, after a bereavement, to strive for the achievement of a previous level of functioning. That would render one capable of functioning well on the old basis: with a spouse or with a parent. In actuality, the bereaved person *must surpass* the former level of functioning in order to be able to survive successfully without the support and interplay with the person who died. The group members learn from each other, advise each other, give emotional support and often tangible help. They learn to communicate and to trust. They gain the emotional freedom to express themselves in the family and in the outside world. They learn adaptive techniques and coping mechanisms from each other. As they grow in strength, so do their children. Even the children who do not attend the groups gain through

their parents' adjustment and growth, for the children's well-being very directly reflects their parents' emotional state.

Some people say that "time heals everything." This is not true. We need time to heal, with time, memories of pain fade, with time, we learn to adjust. Time does not *do* the healing. We must *use* time for learning to cope, adjust, deal with life; for sorting of memories and feelings.

People may seem to recover, be less depressed after passage of time, but if they do not work through their grief,

do not deal with their ambivalent feelings or feelings of abandonment, they will repress them and these repressed feelings may hurt them later in life. They may be left with a fear of loss and rejection, may be unable to form close relationships, may find it difficult to trust people or situations. This is why we feel that bereaved people need a supportive, sharing, corrective experience.

We hope that we are helping them to gain the "SERENITY" to accept and the "COURAGE" to change.

#### Twenty-five years ago in this Journal

The belief is held in some quarters that a secure and dignified life for the Jew is threatened by the contemporary burgeoning of religious climate. This fear has expressed itself in actions that appear as hostility to all forms of religious activity.

Historically, Jewish emancipation was a product of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution; the churches were the enemies of Jewish emancipation. In the United States, where Jews have come closer to enjoying equality than in any other country, the separation of church and state is largely responsible for this happy outcome.

What should be our goal in defending church-state separation? For Jews, as Jews, the goal is to preserve religious liberty and a pluralistic social order. Yet our actions sometimes give a different impression altogether.

Out West, one of the state universities has proposed to create a school

of religion, not a divinity school or theological seminary, but a school of religion. The local Jewish reaction opposes the idea on church-state grounds. But is it not like opposing "In God We Trust" on our coins on church-state grounds? When we act in this way, do we not give the impression that we are against religion?

To be sure the separation principle is one of the basic attributes of American democracy and a major contribution to the position of the Jew in the United States. However, equally important are the fact and the consciousness of America's religious pluralism. Of course our conception of religious freedom covers secularists as well; and they, too, have their rights of conscience.

John Slawson  
on: "Underlying Assumptions in  
Jewish Community Relations"