

# A LINE ON LIFE

7/17/95

## When Someone Dies

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Most of us have had someone close who has died. If not, you are very likely to have this experience in the future. How will you react? Is there a way you *should react*?

There is no one way a person is supposed to react when another dies. Depending on the circumstances of the death, your relation to the dead person and other factors, you may experience almost any emotion or a whole range of emotions.

The most commonly noticed emotions involve **grief** and **sorrow** for the loss. Some people believe a mourner should always express great grief. However, the amount of grief depends on how close you were to the departed person. The grief and sorrow you experience may be just as great for a pet that dies. Extreme loss may be felt when someone moves away permanently, even when that person does not die.

One way of viewing any loss – whether it involves death or not – is like a "**black hole**" that leaves an empty spot ripped out of the fabric of your life. If any person touches your everyday life to a great extent, when they are gone, the "**black hole**" they leave will be large and hard to fill. If the loss is great, so are the grief and sorrow. The mourner may strongly yearn for the dead person, unable to concentrate on everyday tasks. They may have restless activity, or eating and sleeping patterns may be disrupted.

In contrast, if the dead person had very little impact on your daily life, the feeling of loss is minimized. Many children have told me that they have had little grief when a grandparent (or other relative) died. This was typical when the grandparent had little contact with the child. In this instance, the "**black hole**" is very small and is easily filled. Usually the child is more affected by the parents' grief and sorrow. Some children feel guilty, because they believe they should be filled with as much grief and sorrow as their parents. With the difference in close emotional ties, this is an unrealistic expectation.

Some mourners are filled with **self-questioning, self-criticism** and even **self-blame**. If they would have done something differently or better – usually beyond their capabilities – they think that the loved one would not have died. Sometimes the self-blame may be due to the person actually contributing to the death – like drunken driving which causes the death of a loved one – but typically this guilt is *unjustified*. Often people criticize themselves, because they did not let the deceased person know how much s/he was *loved* and *needed* when alive.

Often the anger is turned outward, **blaming others** for the death. Even the *deceased* might be blamed. The mourner may believe that the dead person "*chose*" to die and thus "*deserted*" the mourner. (This is more typical with younger children.) *Relatives* could be

blamed for not treating the deceased well. *Medical staff* – physicians, nurses and others – may be blamed for the death, whether they are at fault or not. This may be a partial cause for malpractice suits. Some even blame *God* for taking their loved one, losing their faith and resenting religious representatives who try to console them.

In contrast, some people have a feeling of **relief** when the death occurs. This is usually when the deceased has been suffering greatly before the death. However, the relief could be the mourner's. Suppose a senile grandparent is being cared for in the family home, causing a multitude of problems for all who live there. When the problems approach the limits of endurance, there is a natural feeling of relief when the grandparent dies. Because they feel relieved, some people also feel guilty. They do not realize that the relief is caused by the end of the living problems – not the death of the loved one – even though both happen at the same time.

Another response to the death of a loved one is **numbness** – "*I just don't feel anything.*" This is more likely to occur after a long illness, during which the deceased had many near-death experiences before finally dying. All the grieving has taken place during these earlier experiences, leaving the person feeling drained and numb.

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**Many people do not appreciate what they have,  
until it is lost.**

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Although reading this column may make you feel sad, there is a lesson to be learned. Many of us don't tell others how much they mean to us. Then we regret this omission after the person dies. If you understand that today may be the last day you will ever see a person – especially a loved one – you will appreciate them much more. Let them know how much you appreciate them! Both you and they will get much more out of living.

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