

Jay's Jottings

By Jay Uhler

My parents called Friday to say that my grandmother had died during the afternoon. She was 85 Easter Sunday.

The first weekend in March I drove to Pennsylvania to see her for the last time. My Grandmother Confer had written to say that if I wanted to be with Grammy Englert before she died, I should come soon.

It meant a lot to me then, but it means even more now. We both knew we would not see each other again. She had cancer and knew she was about to die.

I was surprised to see her so thin, but more surprised that she was sitting in a chair dressed. She had a beautician friend come in that morning to fix her hair. It looked white and pretty and the blue dress was fresh and attractive. She had gone all out for our last visit.

Shortly after I arrived we began to talk about her dying. She said, "I'm ready to die. I hope you are ready for me to die."

"I'm ready for you to die, Grammy, but I surely will miss you," I answered as the tears began to come into my eyes. She said she didn't want anyone to mourn for her after she died. I reassured her that my grief would not be for her dying, because I didn't want her to suffer anymore, but my grief was because we couldn't see each other again.

We had been friends since I was born and had talked together before about deep and serious things, but that weekend we were the closest. We reminisced about times together: band concerts she had taken me to as a youngster, trips to Kentucky to visit my parents in recent years. She got out an album of pictures and newspaper clippings of events in our lives and in hers. We had fun looking into the past.

Just before it was time for me to leave for Boston she asked me to pray with her. I'm seldom asked these days so I was surprised, but also pleased because I knew how important it was to her.

After our prayers, her thoughts were more with me than with herself. She told me that I had always been a special person to her. She talked about some of the suffering that I had experienced in my life and expressed how she had felt hurt, too, for me. We talked a bit more, then we gently hugged and kissed each other goodbye for the last time.

As I drove away sobbing, I thought about how she had come close to tears once, but had seemed more happy than sad during my visit, even though we had talked about painful things. I don't believe she was avoiding her feelings. I believe that my visit meant as much to her as to me and she was happy that I had come to say goodbye and relieved that she was going to die.

The next week she went into the hospital and didn't return to her home.

As I look down on the clouds over Connecticut from my seat in the jet taking me to meet with my family, there is much joy mixed with my pain and tears for it's not like going to say goodbye to her in a casket. We already said goodbye to each other with all the caring which had developed through the years.

These articles on healing from grief are taken from a series called "Jay's Jottings." They were carried in twelve suburban newspapers near Boston, Massachusetts.

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The emphasis of many of my previous articles has been related to feelings. I believe that the information I've shared is important for its own sake, but I have also been laying a foundation for articles on family situations which are a "crisis." "Crisis" as I'm using the term means any situation which places strain or stress on a family.

A series of future articles will be about crises that most families face: i.e., death, marriage, pregnancy, birth of a child, moving, illness and some that are becoming more common to families: i.e. divorce, loss of a job.

The purpose of the articles is to help you know what to expect when you experience such events. It is much easier to cope with a situation if you can understand it. It is far less frightening if you know that what you are experiencing is typical. When someone to whom you are close dies, the feelings are varied and often very intense. Some people get frightened that they will "fall apart" or "go to pieces", that they are "crazy" to have such feelings. It can be comforting to know that what you are experiencing is natural, that other people have the same or similar feelings in the same situations, and that with time and facing them the upset will pass.

All of us at sometime in our life will experience the death of someone we love, so let's begin with grief. I classify grief into three stages. The first one is denial and disbelief. The second stage is one of "grief work". This is a time period when a person faces the feelings related to the death and works through them. (I'll explain in later articles). The final stage is one of reinvesting oneself in new people and activities having emotionally "let go" of the deceased.

It could sound as though these stages are clear-cut. Actually, they overlap. I separate them in an attempt to be more clearly understood. Stage one is automatic. It varies in degree of intensity with the person and the situation that causes the death. An accident will have far more shock than someone whose death is anticipated. It can last anywhere from a few days after the funeral to an indefinite period. The average time span would be a few weeks. The longer a person remains in this stage, before moving to the second stage, the more problems will occur.

This first stage of the grief process serves an important purpose. It is a buffer to protect you from the enormous impact of pain that would hit you when some one dies unexpectedly. The cushioning effect of the disbelief and denial gives your system a chance to face in smaller doses the painful reality.

It is important for both physical and emotional health that you face the fact of the death. A person who stays in stage one and denies the death usually does so to avoid the pain they will experience.

Stage two is the most important and fortunately can be managed very well if you know how (see later articles.) The time span varies too greatly to be able to set limits on it. It is necessary to move through both stage one and two to get to stage three. If a person does not face the death and then face the feelings surrounding the death, emotional, physical or behavioral problems can develop.

Deep depression is often related to unresolved feelings about the loss of a parent or significant person when you were young. Various bodily aches and pains, gastrointestinal disorders, rheumatoid arthritis and other physical symptoms may be related to unresolved feelings stemming from the death of someone you loved.

Next week we will look at the typical physical and emotional responses during stage one.

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This week we are considering stage one of the grief process, which typically ranges from two days to two weeks, sometimes longer. The strongest reactions during this period of shock, denial and disbelief are physical symptoms.

1. There may be difficulty breathing. Breath comes in short gasps and deep sighs. There can be a sensation of not getting as much breath as you need.
2. Tightness in the throat may go along with the difficulty in breathing. There can be difficulty eating. Just getting food down can seem like a major task.
3. Also, there can be an emptiness in the pit of the stomach. Yet this is not like feeling hungry. Often nausea exists at the same time you feel empty. This sensation of needing to vomit does nothing to enhance your appetite.
4. General feelings of weakness occur, sometimes located in the legs, but often all over. The sensation of having lost your strength can be most conspicuous after climbing stairs or some other exercise.
5. Tearfulness and weeping are commonly present. There may be heavy sobbing, but that type of crying is more likely to occur during the second stage. However, that varies with the individual as everyone responds to death in their own way.
6. Numbness is a part of shock, disbelief and denial. People will say, "I just feel numb", as opposed to stating specific feelings. Clarifying their emotions comes during the second stage. The numbness is a buffer to protect us from the full intensity of the feelings that will occur later.

My theory about the purpose of the physical reactions is as follows: The tightness in the throat, the difficulty breathing, the difficulty eating, the quiet crying, the numbness, the weakness all have to do with a binding of the strong emotions, a buffering effect. With the tightening of the emotions comes a tightening of the body and its energy. The emptiness in the stomach comes from losing someone whose life was an important part of your own—from the loss.

Why a person reacts the way he does is not of primary significance. Most important is to be aware that some or all of these physical reactions occur and there is nothing unique or strange about you when you experience them.

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Two weeks ago we noted that the first stage of grief is primarily one of physical reactions. There is no clear-cut boundary between the two stages. As a person moves into the second stage which I refer to as the "grief-work" stage, the awareness of the feelings becomes greater and they emerge with more and more intensity.

Before we move on to the second stage, I want to mention a phenomenon common to both. After a significant person in your life has died, there is the expectation of seeing him in familiar situations. I guess you could call it a "memory repetition." Some examples are expecting your husband to come home from work, or to walk into a room and see your wife in her familiar role, or to wake up in the morning and be surprised that your spouse is not there, or to think that soon your child will come home from school. After any anticipation similar to this, you suddenly remember that the person is dead. This is a common experience after someone has died.

Now let's think specifically about the "grief-work" stage. I call it "grief-work" because it is work to deal with the feelings. They vary in intensity depending on the cause of death, the slowness or suddenness of its happening, the age of the person, how important they were to you or how much a part of your life they played and the type of relationship you had. You may be able to think of other factors that would influence the degree of intensity of the feelings.

But what are the feelings? I'll mention them without much detail so you get a total picture, then in later articles be more specific about each. 1. A sense of loss and the emotion of sadness are often the strongest feelings. 2. Frustration is another. This is a combination of helplessness and anger because there is nothing you can do to change or reverse death when it occurs. 3. Guilt is a third feeling. You may have had the best relationship humanly possible, but when a person important to you dies there is the feeling, that you shouldn't have done something that you did or that you should have done something that you didn't. 4. Fear is often intense and can exist for any of these reasons or all of them: (a) someone else's death reminds you that you will die; (b) concerns about how you will manage without the presence of the person who died; (C) fear of the variety and the intensity of the other feelings I'm mentioning.

5. Ambivalence is a term referring to both negative and positive feelings about the person's death; i.e. you miss them but you're relieved that they are not suffering any more.

I'll explain more later.

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When a spouse, child, parent, good friend, relative or any person who has been an important part of our life dies, it's as though a part of us dies. We lose someone who has shared events and experiences with us. No more can we share fun times or get mad at each other or express and receive affection with the person or face tense moments or tragedies together. It isn't just people we love for whom we feel loss. Even if we hate someone who was a big part of our life there is an empty space, a sense of loss.

The sadness that occurs is in knowing that we won't be together again, that all the sharing is past and there is no present or future together. The only links we have with the dead one are our memories.

It is necessary to think about and talk about the person who died. Often as we think or talk, the sadness and pain will surface. Tears and crying or sobbing are natural ways of expressing the sadness and pain. Some people tend to do this alone. I think it is far less lonely to talk to and cry with other members of our family or trusted, caring friends who can support us by encouraging us to talk and cry,

Talking has a way of bringing events and memories into focus. Crying is a way of washing the sadness and pain out of our bodies. This past November when I was facing a loss in my life, I was with a group of about twenty-five of my minister friends. As tears were flowing down my cheeks, a good friend approached me from the other side of the room. His words were, "I have seen my brothers pain and I've tasted the salt of his tears." Then with a wet cloth he washed my face. His caring invited me to sob and as I did he put his arms around me and other men touched my arms and back to comfort me. Many of the other men were crying, some because they shared with me my pain, others because my pain triggered their own. It brought us even closer than we had been.

I believe that this is the role of a family. When someone important to us dies there is a need to sit down together to talk about the memories, to share the loss, the sadness, the tears and to comfort each other while crying together or at least being together.

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When an important person in your life dies it is usually frustrating. The frustration, a combination of anger and helplessness, occurs because there isn't a damn thing you can do about it when someone is dead. Nothing can be done to make the person live again. The only useful alternative is to accept the reality that no more will the person be a flesh and blood part of your life. That's frustrating.

The question then is, what do you do with your anger? The first step is to acknowledge to yourself that you are angry and that anger is a natural part of grief.

The next step is to understand that feelings "seek" a focus. They may be directed toward a doctor or nurse who cared for the deceased, toward a relative, a clergyman, the person who died, or God.

This does not mean that the person who is the focus of your anger deserves it. It may seem strange to feel angry toward someone who died. However, you need to realize that feelings just occur and they are not always intellectually logical. Resentment related to feeling abandoned is common for children when a parent dies, but it may be complicated by guilt or fear if a child has been taught not to feel anger toward parents. A husband or wife may feel angry at their spouse for dying and letting them in the "lurch."

Anger toward God is logical if you believe that "the Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away." Then God is to blame for your loved one leaving. I don't believe it, but I do believe that there are other reasons why a person would direct their feelings of anger toward god.

When I had a parish a woman in the congregation found herself unable to enter the church building after her husband died. Her first husband had been killed by lightning, sometimes referred to as "an act of God." Her second husband died at home while she was in Sunday morning worship. It's easy to expect her to have angry feelings toward god. It is unfortunate that she couldn't accept them in herself and feared that God couldn't accept them either.

Once you have acknowledged that you are angry about the death, realized on whom the feelings are focused, and accepted them as natural for the situation, choosing how to express them leads to the final step of getting the anger out of your system. For some people talking out their anger is effective, for others pounding pillows helps, for another shouting their wrath; some people express their anger by crying. The mode of expression is not as important as expressing it and getting the feelings of anger out of your body.

As you can see constructive grieving is work.

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Most people experience guilt when a person close to their life dies. In every human relationship there are angry feelings toward the person you love. There are differences and conflicts. Hurt feelings occur.

When a loved one dies there is a tendency to feel guilty about times when you were angry or about conflicts you shared or about something you did which resulted in **your** loved one feeling hurt.

There also may be guilt about what you did not do, but now wish you would have done. It may be you wish you would have told your loved one, perhaps your father, that you loved him, but you didn't and now it's too late. Or you always wanted to take him to a special event, now you can't. A woman I know felt very guilty when her father died. She had stayed by his deathbed for many hours while he was in a coma. Her family insisted that she take a short rest, which she did. While she was asleep her father asked for her and immediately died. Even though she had spent a long time with him, was exhausted from caring for him, she felt enormous guilt because she had not been there when he asked for her.

The important point is: **even though there is no justification for guilt, guilty feelings occur when a person close to you dies.** Once when I went to the visiting hours for an elderly woman, her son told me that he felt guilty about his relationship with his mother. I asked why. His response was that he didn't know why. There was no reason. He had been good to her, had visited her regularly and often. He just felt guilty. I told him I wasn't surprised and that his feelings were natural. It is easy to assume that if you feel guilty, you must be guilty. This is NOT true. Guilt lies. It tells you that you are a bad person, when you are not. Remind your self that guilt is a natural emotion when someone dies. Then remind yourself of your good qualities.

One more point I want to make about guilt. As I've mentioned before, feelings seek a focus. Guilt is no exception. If you find yourself feeling extremely guilty about something you did or didn't do for the dead person, the chances are good that the incident has become the focus for the natural guilt that occurs. It can be useful to remind yourself that you didn't do or neglect doing anything deserving of the guilt. Then just accept the feelings and go on living your life.

If you did some things worthy of the guilt you are feeling, it is too late now to do anything about it with the deceased. Tell someone you trust about it, so that you are not carrying it as a deep, dark secret, and then forgive yourself.

If you find that you can't give up the guilt, don't keep whipping yourself. Talk to a therapist or clergyman about why you need to cling to the guilt.

Guilt can be a tricky and troublesome feeling, but it need not be negative if you understand it and learn to make it work for you. Actually, it can be a way of calling attention to some attitudes or memories inside you that need to be explored. If you are willing to face the discomfort that comes with guilt, you can turn it into an opportunity to recognize your virtues and heal.

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Death and fear go together. When we see someone who is dead it raises questions about our own death. What is death like? One of the fears is of the unknown. Nobody that I know has ever died and come back to tell me what death is like. There are many people who have theories about what happens when someone dies. There are various beliefs in which people have faith, but nobody knows for an absolute certainty. For many people that is frightening.

It can also be scary not to know when you will die. The questions come. Will I be ready? How will loved ones manage after I die? Seeing someone dead also raises fears about losing someone close to you by death.

If you have not faced these fears about death, going to a wake/visiting hours at a funeral home or attending a funeral can be a very disturbing event. It is never pleasant, but it can be unbearable if you haven't faced the fears about your own death or the possible death of a loved one.

When someone close to you dies it can be frightening to think about how you will cope in the future without that person to help you. For children it can be, how will I manage without my parent? For a wife the fear may be about the' financial future. For a husband, who will take care of the children? For either spouse the fear may be, how can I be both a father and mother to my children? For an elderly person it may be a fear of who will die next or will all my friends die before me and I'll be alone? Facing the future without a person on whom you have depended can be fearful.

One final source of fear that may occur when someone close to you dies is the fear of the intensity and variety of the feelings themselves. Few times in a person's life are there so many feelings with such magnitude as when a person whose life is intertwined with ours dies. The loss, the sadness, the anger, the helplessness, the guilt, the fears, the physical and emotional pain can seem nearly overwhelming. The more uptight you get with everyday feelings, the more frightening the feelings will be for you in a grief situation. The primary preventive preparation for a crisis is to work at becoming comfortable with strong feelings one at a time when they occur day by day. The secondary prevention is to educate yourself about what feelings are typical to the situation, in this case death, so you will understand what you are experiencing.

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I'm sitting here struggling in my mind about how to say what I mean in an appropriate manner. Perhaps as I write I will discover a way. Let me share what I'm thinking even though it doesn't sound good to me.

It doesn't seem totally true to say that you're "glad" that a loved one died or that you're "happy." Maybe you could say that you're "pleased." To be "relieved" that someone died is entirely possible.

The point I'm trying to make is that there may be some positive feelings relating to a person's death. What I'm about to say may seem rambling, but it is relevant. My grandfather and I were quite close. He died when he was 77 years old. I was in my late 20's. One of the times I cried was when a man came to the visiting hours on his way home from work. He said that he had liked my grandfather and had come by to show his respect. The man worked in the mines. As we stood quietly looking into my grandfather's casket, tears began to stream down through the coal dust on his cheeks. We stood there together crying, this stranger whom I had never met, sharing a moment I shall never forget.

Even though it hurt when my grandfather died, I was glad that he didn't suffer. My grandmother found him dead on the dining room floor. He had always been an active man. He had his own garden and enjoyed carpentry up until he died. Shortly before his death, during his retirement, he built a small building in the cemetery. He was buried in the lot nearest it. He would have been miserable if he had been bedridden or even incapacitated for even a short time. I was pleased that he died quickly.

I stress this because some people feel guilty if they have positive feelings about someone's death, especially if they benefit by the death. It can be a big relief when a loved one dies if they have placed a strain on your family finances or on your physical and emotional energy from constant visits to a hospital or nursing home through a long, critical illness. To feel relieved or glad or pleased does not indicate that you didn't love the dead person.

It is possible that you could benefit from another's death. If you are having financial problems and insurance or an inheritance from a parent solves these, you might feel guilty about that, but you certainly don't need to.

When someone you love dies there will be many painful feelings, but there may also be feelings of gratification. Don't be surprised or upset about them. They are just as natural to the situation as the other feelings we've discussed.

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If you remember we began many weeks ago talking of the three stages of grief. The recent articles have been about the feelings that occur during stage two. Before we move to stage three, there is another aspect of stage two of which I was vaguely aware but didn't become clear to me until two years ago in a session with a client. This person had faced and expressed the feelings that I have written about (loss, frustration, guilt, fears, ambivalence), but wasn't emotionally letting go of his dead parent.

Then it struck me! There was something more to let go of. There was the DREAM of the parent that he hoped his father would sometime become. His father had not been the caring person that he had needed and wanted him to be. He clung to the hope that someday his father would change. Now the possibility of his father becoming that affectionate person was gone. Once the dream was clarified and the feelings about the impossibility of it ever coming true were expressed, the grief-work was completed and the person moved to stage three.

This may seem theoretical to some of you¹, but I choose to take the risk of boring you on the chance that for others it will be helpful.

Let's pursue this dream issue a bit more. The above illustration is one of an adult whose parent had died. A similar situation could be true when a spouse dies or when a child dies.

What are the marital dreams that get shattered when a spouse dies? 'One is the hope perpetuated by cultural mythology of "living happily ever after" in a state of conflict-free bliss. As I've mentioned earlier, lack of facing conflict in a relationship leads to disappointment, so that even meaningful relationships don't fulfill the myth.

Realistic dreams can also be dashed by the death of a spouse. Hopes of moving to the city or the country or owning a house, a trip together 'to a special place or some anticipated, shared event may be lost.

When a child dies the broken dreams may be of what the child would become. Parents have dreams about what type of person their child is becoming, kind of vocation he or she will choose, the family they will establish, recognition they will receive. It may be the dream of future grandchildren that gets thwarted.

Dreams, hoped for experiences, anticipated accomplishments are important to an expanding life. As you can see, dreams need to be acknowledged when those dreams are terminated by death.

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Jay's Jotting's

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We have traveled together the painful route of separation observing what goes on inside of us when a person whose life is significantly intertwined with our life **dies**. (Remember that this can be literal, physical death. It can also be separation or divorce; it can be due to changing jobs or moving from one location to another. The feelings and stages that we have discussed can occur with any change or transition)

During stage one we weren't even aware of moving. Everything seemed to stop. It was as though we had driven into a stone wall. We were shocked and numb. We ached all over. Our body wasn't functioning. We had difficulty eating, sleeping, breathing and moving. Part of us was denying that anyone had died.

But all this had a purpose and we were proceeding imperceptibly through the first phase of grief. As we gradually became aware of our progress, we saw a fork in the road. The right fork was a slow distressing trip through a swamp of intense frightening feelings of loss, sadness, anger, helplessness, guilt, fear and loneliness.

The left fork was a quick entry to the city named Denial. Wow! What appeal! No pain (now). No crying (on the outside). No work (no payday either). No sore muscles or internal organs (yet). I hope that none of you took that route. If you did, you might reconsider, return to the junction and take the trip through the quagmire.

Those of you who came with me through the swamp, you still look a bit muddy, yet there's a gift of inner strength and peace that wasn't there before.

The last little bit was a bummer when we thought we were almost out of the mess, then had to face feelings about our shattered dreams and get back into the feelings about them, but we got through that, too.

Now the last leg of the trip: stage three. We have to get back onto the main road into the ongoing flow of traffic (life). That is a bit frightening because it means investing ourselves again in people and activities. The fear is that to get close to someone again, to love again means to risk losing again. Other people whom we invest ourselves in may also die. Activities may end.

So another fork confronts us: seclusion or socialization. This time there are many roads in between the two and which road we take depends on our particular personality. The trip is finished when we arrive at a new sense of completeness and wholeness after having experienced a chunk of our life ripped away from us by death.

Hopefully the road that we have traveled and the map that we drew along the way will be helpful to other journeyers who choose to follow us.

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A special family issue at the time of death is what to do with the children. Many well-intentioned parents have handled it in such a way that the child is emotionally and/or physically damaged for life. The trauma occurs when a child is sent away from home, isn't told that the person died, or isn't included in the grief process with the family.

Both children and adults can handle the truth better than "protective deceit", little white lies, being brushed aside or excluded. Where there is an information vacuum, fantasy fills the void. Children or adults try to figure out what happened when the facts aren't available. The fantasies often don't fit the facts and are far more painful and frightening than the truth.

An example is the father who sent his young son and daughter away to be with relatives when his wife died. The children put their heads together and came up with the fantastic theory that their father had killed their mother and that he wanted them out of the way so that he could dispose of the evidence of the murder. The truth was that he was terribly hurt by his wife's death and wanted to "protect" the children from the intensity of his feelings. What was intended as protection brought about enormous distrust. The children then had the loss of both parents to contend with—one by death, the other due to fear and distrust.

Contrast this with the scene of a mother crying. Four year old Johnny comes into the room and asks, "Mommy, why are you crying?"

"I feel sad, Johnny," she said as she put him on her lap. "I just got news that your grandfather died."

"Why are you sad?"

"Because, I love him and we won't be able to be with him anymore."

"I'll miss Grampy, too, Mommy, Why did he die?"

"His heart stopped beating. It worked hard for many years and when a person gets old sometimes his heart stops and he dies. That's what happened to Grampy." (This is just the beginning of several questions and more sharing.)

Children often can cope with situations of intense feelings as well as, if not better than, adults. Children will always pick up the vibrations of a situation even though they may not understand what they mean. **A child can face a crisis well if the child is around adults who will share their own feelings in a natural way and will share the facts relating to the person's death at the child's level of understanding.**

A principal that I live by (obviously not original) is "the truth hurts, but the truth will set you free."

A superb little book is "Telling A Child About Death" by Edgar N. Jackson, Channel Press, 1965.

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Let me share some more thoughts about how to respond to children when someone dies. I chose the word respond because children will let you know what they need if encouraged to do so.

Edgar N. Jackson in his book "Telling A Child About Death" emphasizes the importance of answering the questions that a child asks; not giving a lot of answers to unasked questions.

I agree. If you answer the questions when the child asks, you are responding to what he is now thinking and possibly struggling with. If you give him a lot of information about unasked questions, it can be confusing to the child and it may be a way of meeting your own needs rather than the child's.

In my opinion, however, it is better to err on the side of giving more answers than not enough. I also think there is an exception to what I've said about responding to the questions the child asks. What if the child doesn't ask any questions? Parents then, rather than making statements, should be asking and inviting questions. Examples are: "Do you miss Grandma?" or "You seem deep in thought. Will you share your thoughts with me?" In this way you are showing interest in your child's needs and inviting sharing.

So far we've been thinking about talking. What about actions? Again it's a matter of responding to the child.

I'm expecting some of you to disagree with what I'm about to say. I think children should be invited to the visiting hours or wake and to the funeral. Children should be included in the activities surrounding the death as much as they wish to be. Also, there are not necessarily, but can be, enormous negative effects on anyone who doesn't see the deceased. The mind can have a way of playing tricks on you causing you to think the person didn't die if you didn't see them dead.

As important as I believe it to be for a child to be able to attend the visiting hours or the funeral or both, I think it is just as important that the child not be pressured to go. If he resists going, he has his reasons.

To summarize what I'm saying, children have the ability to know and choose what is best for themselves in this type of situation and adults should take the child's opinion seriously.

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