

# Death of a Parent: The Effect on the Family

*Brown, Forster, Temes, & Akner.*

The death of one or both parents can have a significant impact on the surviving family members. Each member of a family has his or her own unique personality and behavior that influences other family members, as well as the family as a whole. When one member dies, the delicate balance of a family is thrown off, as the family struggles to adjust to the “empty chair” in the family.

## **Finding Family Balance**

After a death, the surviving family members must establish new patterns, roles and relationships. Confusion sets in as familiar family roles are abandoned and new ones are established. If a family is to survive, the members must find a way to come out of this period of grief stronger and more firmly bonded. The death of a parent not only upsets the family balance but it can reveal hidden wounds.” Adult children can be forced to confront the truth about family relationships. Hidden resentments, regrets and unspoken words can appear. The parent who has died may have acted as a mediator between different family members. Siblings may fight over disposal of property and possessions. This is usually not caused by greed but the emotional legacy that is given to the possessions. One sibling may feel that they did the most for the parent when they were alive and therefore deserve more of an inheritance. Children may have different memories of the same childhood events. The adult child who tries to build a “shrine” to parents may be offended when others remember something different. It is important to remember that each sibling is their own person and had their own unique relationship with the parent and therefore will grieve differently.

## **Redefining Roles**

The death of a parent can also bring family members together. Surviving family members may now see how fragile life can be, how easily the people they love can be taken away from them and appreciate other family members more. Adult children can take over roles previously held by the parent and go from being one who attends family events to be the one that initiates family get-togethers. Paul Kane, who lost his parents within six month of each other, explains it this way, “I think my parents were the mortar between the bricks as far as the family goes. After they died, we as individuals had to make more effort to get together. There wasn't the scaffolding anymore, that structure within the family that had given direction to things for 40, 50 years.” (Brown, 2000)

*The family is like any other interactive system. Each member leaves a lasting effect on the others. The memories of a loved one provide history and continuity to our lives. The “empty chair” in our lives is not really empty. We have been forever touched by those we love and have been loved by.*

