

**DEATH
NOTIFICATION –
UNDERSTANDING
GRIEF &
BEREAVEMENT**

Physiology of Grief

By understanding the physiological responses that accompany acute grief, the notifier can better appreciate the level of compromise the loss creates and the specific grief management requirements that result.

“Acute Grief” is best described as a state of emotional stress.

“Bereavement” is sorrow following the death of a loved one

Understanding Grief

Intense grief and sorrow are unavoidable consequences from the loss of a loved one. These difficult feelings play a critical role in the healing process, preparing us to ultimately relinquish our dead, to risk further and care again.

Because of this vital role of grief, full grieving is to be encouraged and neither the family, the medical staff nor the person who make the death notification should attempt to abbreviate or obscure the painful feelings that occur in each phase of the resolution process.

IDENTIFYING
COPING
PATTERNS
AND
RESPONSE TO
DEATH
NOTIFICATION

- **HOLISTIC GRIEF**
- **ACTION-ORIENTED GRIEF**
- **INORDINATELY CALM
RESPONSE**
- **EMOTIONAL WITHDRAWAL**
- **EXTREME GUILT**
- **SITUATIONAL BLAMING**
- **GRIEF AND ANGER**

Grief Resolution Pattern Theories

Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross *On Death and Dying*, 1970 New York:
Macmillan

- DENIAL
- ANGER
- BARGAINING
- DEPRESSION
- ACCEPTANCE

Sudden Catastrophic Loss Patterns are slightly altered

Epperson, M.M. "Families in Sudden Crisis: process and intervention in critical care center." *Social Work in Health Care*, 1977, vol. 2, no. 3, pp. 265-273

- High Anxiety
- Denial
- Anger
- Remorse
- Grief
- Reconciliation

Typical Notification Response

A few common notification responses are described to assist you in assessing the behaviors you may encounter. Each of the responses described are generally within normal limits.

HOLISTIC GRIEF RESPONSE

This is the idealized model, usually exhibited only in degrees. It is highly dependent on circumstance, hence rarely fully manifested.

It is evident to the extent that individuals are open to the ensuing events and honestly meet their fear.

They gather others around them and pour out their grief, allowing others who are present to do the same.

There is great pain evident; they have lost a loved one and have not escaped the burden.

Action-oriented Grief Response

This response is characterized by rapid movement toward organization and activity.

It can initially be functional and useful, so there is some tendency to encourage it.

The goal of this response is to emotionally buffer oneself, and often others, from any experience perceived as painful or tumultuous by remaining preoccupied with other tasks at hand.

Inordinately Calm Response

This grief response usually represents a mild degree of denial.

It is not pathological, as there is not active refutation of the death reality, but it does indicate a deliberate attempt to set aside the emotional reality for another time.

Emotional Withdrawal Response

Certain Individuals will place barriers to communication and interaction and turn inward, circumventing some or all of the elements of discussion.

Most commonly, this response is identified by a down, or, outward-turned gaze, an effort to avoid spontaneous discussion or comments, or even a refusal to respond to direct questioning.

Extreme Guilt Response

Feelings of guilt are common at the loss of a loved one.

Survivors routinely make statements such as, “I shouldn’t have let him leave,” or “I should have been there.”

Usually, these feelings are mitigated easily with reality testing. Occasionally, true culpability exists. In such situations, great care must be taken to achieve a balance between acceptance of reality and supporting the person.

Situational Blaming Response

This is a common response and is quite sensitive to environmental influences and circumstance. It is most evident when there is an element of culpability present, whether perceived or real.

In such situations, it must be dealt with promptly to return the bereft person to appropriate progress in resolving grief.

Grief and Anger

Closely associated with a blaming response is that of anger. The anger may be directed toward life, toward circumstances, or toward oneself and others. It may even be directed toward you – the person bringing bad news!

The most difficult anger-related situations you are likely to encounter, within a normal grief context, are those in which people direct their anger pointedly at you and those in which people exhibit **assaultive behavior**, such as breaking objects and throwing things.

Demonstrative Notification Responses

- Highly Vocalized Grieving
- Striking Out Reactions
- Self-striking Reactions
- Emotive Chanting

Highly Vocalized Grieving

Upon notification of a death, one of the more disconcerting family responses is that of overwhelming, soul-wrenching anguish (screaming). The depth of this pain can bring about impassioned reactions, including screaming and yelling to vent emotional pain.

An initial reaction such as this can be of such magnitude as to cause you undue concern and to wonder whether you somehow “blew it” in your notification.

This is not usually the case. At times, you may find it necessary to intervene with some who seems near hysteria, but generally the vocal catharsis will run its own course.

Striking Out Reactions

Some people may throw themselves upon the floor, pound on furniture, and otherwise dramatically act out their grief.

In these situations, your own anxiety can be heightened when other family members fix their gazes upon you, either accusingly, for having brought about the traumatic response, or with fearful “do-something” looks, hoping that you can quickly resolve the pain.

Careful management of an extremely demonstrative individual may be in order if the behavior escalates, but generally you will need only to reassure the family that the demonstrative individual is responding normally, while you keep yourself calm.

Self-striking Reactions

This type of reaction may be more common with Asian and Middle-Eastern peoples. This grief pattern consists of striking oneself or objects with substantial force. However, the pattern *never* involves striking anyone else.

While an observer may be concerned, it is rare for this behavior to cause injury. Care should be taken, however, to carefully steer those exhibiting this behavior away from any objects that could injure them.

Emotive Chanting Response

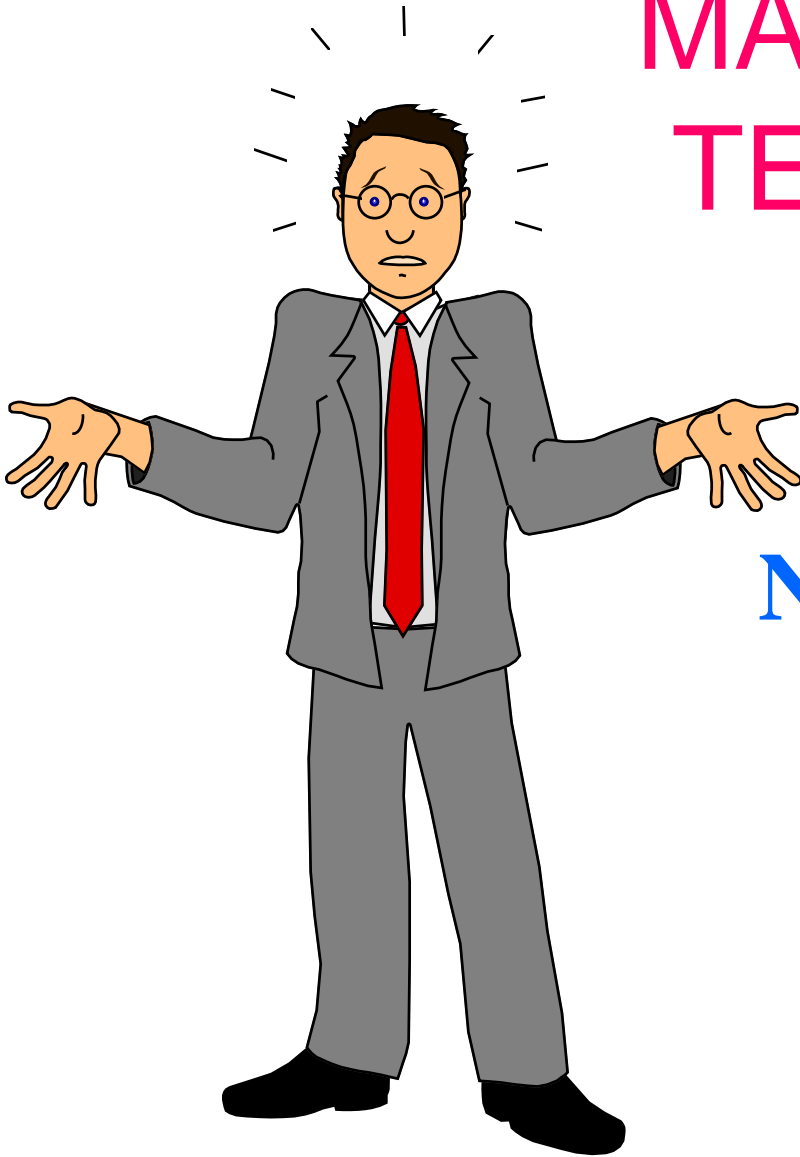
This type of response is exhibited by many cultures, and also typical with some individuals of Pentecostal religious beliefs.

Chanting is an acceptable form of grief expression. It usually involves the rapid repetition of single words or short phrases, often with religious connotations.

Sometimes you may not be able to distinguish the actual words used, but you can always recognize the behavior by the rhythmic nature of the sounds uttered.

The purpose of chanting appears to be the establishment of a briefly altered consciousness to escape the emotional pain. It can be very effective and therefore should not be interrupted too quickly.

MANAGEMENT TECHNIQUES



**NOTIFICATION
STAGING
AND
DELIVERY**

INITIAL FAMILY CONTACT

One of the biggest obstacles in sudden or traumatic death notification is locating the family.



Once the family is located, the notifier must decide how to assemble the family, at what location and how many family members should be present at the time of notification.

Delays in notification may engender undue concern or hostility in a family.

Not only can it compromise a survivors' ability to cope, but can lead to law suits at a later time, placing you and your agency at risk.

Telephone Contacts

There is a recent case in Omaha, Nebraska where a Police Officer left a death notice on the answering machine of a family. Needless to say, this is inappropriate and unacceptable.

Some telephone notifications are unavoidable. However, the telephone should be the last resort in making a death notification.

The Sequential Notification Technique

1. Gather the family in a central location where everyone can hear the notification.
2. Ask what the family may already know of the situation. This can save a lot of unnecessary dialog.
3. Provide information as to the events that led to the death.
4. Provide any information as to resuscitative efforts made on behalf of the decedent.
5. Conclude with the statement that the person “died” and offer a brief (if known) explanation as to the cause of death.

- Never rush the statement of death.
- Remain calm – even when everyone else around you begins to break down and display some of the various grief responses mentioned earlier.
- Verbally reassure the person(s) receiving the news.
- Don't rush their natural reactions. Allow them to express their full and complete initial grief response.

- Stay close, but don't join in the grieving process.
- Don't touch the grieving family member unless they approach you for a comforting hug.
- Never respond to anger and thrashing by a physically restraining the grieving person
- Use verbal commands to end the grieving demonstrations... i.e. *“I know this is difficult for you, but we need to take a minute and talk now!”*

Things To Avoid Saying

- *“He/She is in a better place!”*
- *“I know just how you feel!”*
- *“It was God’s will!”*
- *“You’ll get over this with time!”*
- *“You’ll find someone else, you’ll see !”* (loss of a spouse)
- *“You’ll have other children!”* (loss of an infant)
- *“My father died the same way!”* (sharing life stories)

Verbal Support for the Bereaved

- It is always best to *LISTEN* and provide reassurance to the bereaved.
- Acknowledge the bereaved person's feelings with statements such as *“I'm so sorry!”* and *“I know this is difficult for you!”*
- If the bereaved wishes to talk about the loved one, and if you have the time available, ask them to tell you something about them. Their talking about the person will help with the grieving process.
- Acknowledge the loss and the “unfairness of life” **if** they bring it up.

Common Sense

Use some common sense when making a death notification.

There are seldom two death notifications that are exactly alike.

However, the professional will rehearse and think about the notification process before he/she begins.

Be flexible. Be prepared for almost any eventuality or response.

Be compassionate and kind. You are bringing the worst news possible to someone whose life will never be the same.

They will forever remember you and your agency – **GOOD or BAD** depending on how you make the death announcement.

References:

1. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross (1969). On Death and Dying. New York: MacMillan Publishing Company
2. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross (1975). Death The Final Stage Of Growth. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall
3. R. Moroni Leash (1994) Death Notification – A Practical Guide To The Process. Arkansas City, Kansas: Gilliland Printing

