

## When a Family Loses a Loved One

EVERY FAMILY'S grief is unique. Each must find its own best way to communicate.

**Communicate emotionally.** — Each family member needs to respect every other's way of grieving. Some grieve openly, others in private, others a mix. Time together to grieve is important. Talk, cry, be angry, even sit together silent. And remember the

nonverbal — a touch, a hug, or whatever expresses comfort and caring in your family.

Holidays, anniversaries and birthdays can be hard for families. Before they arrive, discuss how you will observe them. You

might adjust traditional celebrations. Maybe you'll do them a different way this year, or minimize them.

**Communicate about stuff.** — How will your loved one's possessions be divided? If, by now, legal matters and parceling out remain, keep family channels open, honest and friendly. If your loved one has a detailed will, left all to a spouse, or was young, this may be fairly easy.

But what if your loved one's possessions are many, are valuable or seen as precious family mementos and/or create disputes? Move slowly, be careful and be diplomatic.

If possible, put off big decisions on moving, dividing possessions, giving things away, etc. But what if someone starts to argue seriously or starts to do things in secret? Then everyone should agree on the family member who is the best mediator. If that's a problem, bring in legal help.

**Adjust.** — What were your loved one's family roles and responsibilities? Family members must now accept new roles to cover things that need to continue. But remember, you're making sure *their duties and roles* are not ignored. No one replaces your loved one.

What if your loved one was ill for a long time? Then your family may need to adjust to the void their loss created. For months or years, you may have focused on their care, "life as it was before" must resume, but of course life is not as it was.

**Realize YOU are unique.** — Each person copes with their pain and loss in their own way, on their

own timetable. Do what you need for yourself. If you don't, and thus are a wreck, it will be tough to help family cope and adjust.

Within families, styles and timetables of grief can conflict. Don't judge; be sensitive to one another. Sometimes feelings are hard to express. So listen for what's meant, not just what's said.

**Balance.** — Balance your attention between matters having to do with your loved one and with surviving family. Don't stop family from talking about your loved one. But, also, don't make it the only subject. The uniqueness we talked about means, yes, you will do things as a group. Plan family meals, projects or trips. At the same time, no family can address every member's every need. Family members each need time apart. Everyone has their own relationships and activities that can't be ignored. Other supports can make a difference.

**Seek help, if needed.** — Watch over one another. If anyone (including you or the family as a whole) is withdrawn, depressed, or out of control, call your doctor, local mental health agency or us. ■



## How Pets Help You Heal

IT'S COMMON KNOWLEDGE that pets can help those who are grieving, depressed or healing. The Mayo Clinic now has a Caring Canines program, and hospitals nationwide are introducing the idea.

WebMD notes that studies show that dog ownership can lower heart rate and blood pressure.



It can reduce stress hormones. And it can raise levels of mood-enhancing chemicals in the brain.

Interacting with a pet has a number of positive benefits:

- ❖ **Simple, pure love**, unlike how things may be at this time with your family or friends. Psychiatrist Ian Cook, a professor at UCLA, explains, "Pets offer an unconditional love that can be very helpful to people with depression."
- ❖ **Responsibility** that can add a new, positive focus in your life.