

Family Complications While Grieving

Death can bring out the best and worst in families. When friends and families have a conflict after a death, it can feel like another loss, a secondary loss. While you are trying to cope with the death of your loved one, your usual support system can feel unsupportive and a source of additional stress.

Common Family Conflicts after the death of a loved one:

- Sorting through belongings
- Who gets what
- What to keep and what to give away
- Whether to keep or sell a house
- Money
- Disagreements about treatment at the end of life.
- Arrangements
- Relocating
- Custody
- Different grieving styles

Why is conflict after grief common?

Did you know that when people experience stress, their brains actually work differently? It's true!

While we don't need to get bogged down in neuroscience, all you really need to know is this: there are parts of our brain that think rationally and there are parts of our brain that think more on impulse and emotion.

When someone is in a heightened state due to a stressful or traumatic event, it is harder to think with the rational part of the brain so they default to using the emotional parts of their brain. These are the parts that struggle with reasoning, memory, and long-term thinking. Ultimately, when multiple people are under stress and are acting from a place of emotion, conflicts can arise.

Keeping the peace when conflict arises:

Communication isn't always easy, but it is crucial to reducing conflict. Plan as soon as possible for how and when things will be handled. For example,

- Agree on a time frame to all sit down together to go over the will.
- Discuss a plan for next steps for taking care of details.
- Take care to help everyone feel heard and on board with next steps.
- Plan for regular updates and communication between family members.
- Maintain peace. Emotions can run high; it's especially important to communicate with compassion.
- If you have not been able to plan, focus instead on giving feedback and getting on track.
- Avoid accusatory statements as this only escalates emotions.
- Focus on expressing how you are experiencing this using an 'I' statement instead of "you".
 - For example, instead of saying, *"I can't believe you threw away mom's clothes without talking to me first. You are so self-centered and thoughtless."* Instead, you could say, *"I*

was really hurt when you threw away mom's clothes without talking to me first. It made me feel like you didn't care about my grief or my attachment to those things."

- Be open to feedback. Try to openly listen for what they need from you.
- Try not to generalize negative behaviors - to condemn the person – because of something they say or do when experiencing grief.
- Pause. Take a few steps back here. It is important to cut people (and ourselves) some slack.

Please keep this in mind: when people are grieving, emotions can come out “sideways” and can be expressed with anger. If you recognize that this is happening, just listening to the person can be the most helpful thing to do.

Source: Adapted from: <https://whatsyourgrief.com/family-fighting-after-a-death/>