

# **Impact of Death on the Family System**

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The study's purpose was to identify family dysfunctions occurring within two years following death of a family member. The problem, "How is family functioning affected by the death of a family member," was measured by reviewing the charts and genograms of 182 families who had begun treatment at a community mental health center.

Data was collected by tabulating examples of dysfunction on a semi-structured instrument. The following data were tabulated: presenting problems, physical illnesses and dates, deaths, causes and dates; situational and developmental stressors and dates.

Review of the literature showed relationships among these variables. Qualitative methods were employed to study the charts and genograms. In no case did any of the sample identify death of a family member as a reason for seeking counseling or psychotherapy.

The presenting problems fell into four categories: child or adolescent dysfunction, marital conflict, dysfunctional spouse or individual problems. For this sample, there seemed to be increased incidence of physical illness, behavioral problems in children or adolescents, and marital conflict following death of a family member.

X<sub>2</sub> was employed to ascertain significance. The frequency of child and adolescent problems for families experiencing death within two years was 12.94, significant at the .001 level. The frequency of marital conflict as a presenting problem was 6.06, significant at the .02 level. Individual problems and dysfunctional spouse as presenting problems related to death in the family was not significant.

Although further study is needed on a non-clinic population, this research has interesting implications for health care. Family Systems Theory provides further direction for clinical work with bereaved families. Close clinical observation of families undergoing death of a member is important for health assessment and intervention.

Qualitative studies of the meaning of death for family members are essential if we are to provide comprehensive care designed to maintain health in all family members. Examples of ongoing qualitative research on the meaning of death are provided.