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Coping With Losing a Family Member in a Farm Accident

Paul C. Rosenblatt Family Social Science
College of Agricultural, Food, and Environmental Sciences

Farming is one of the most dangerous jobs in America. But little has been written to help people who have lost a family member in a farm accident. Publications about grief that do not directly deal with farm deaths can be helpful. But you may find help here that you cannot find elsewhere.

This fact sheet is based on what 39 people who had lost a family member in a fatal farm accident had to say. The people were residents of Minnesota and Wisconsin and ranged in age from the 18 to 79. The family members killed ranged in age from 3 to 71. The causes of death included tractor roll over, fall from a silo, being caught in a power takeoff or other machinery, being run over by a tractor, backhoe, or planter, being hit by a broken drive shaft, and being gored or knocked down by cattle. The causes of some deaths were never clear.

Grief: We All Grieve in Our Own Way

People grieve in different ways. Everyone feels grief after a farm death, but each person's feelings are different. One person might feel very sad or depressed. Another might feel mostly angry and fearful, another empty, achy, hopeless, and lonely. Many people say they don't feel much at times, that they feel numb. Some say that they don't have the energy to do their chores or to do them at all well, and some say that much or even all that they do seems meaningless. For some people the feelings are constant; for others they come and go and change quite a bit.

Don't be surprised if different people in the family grieve differently. Don't give up on other family members because they grieve differently from you, and don't give up on yourself or let others give up on you because you grieve differently. One of the big challenges for a farm family that has had a loss is to accept that people grieve in different ways.

Does grief happen in stages? Some people say that grief goes through a predictable sequence of stages, starting with numbness and ending with some kind of resolution of the grief. If stages help you understand your feelings, that's fine. But many bereaved people experience things that don't fit any stage. They may skip stages, return to feelings they thought they had left behind, blend stages together, and experience stages out of sequence. *Don't be*

upset or surprised if grieving is not a matter of stages for you or someone else in your family. Said a 51-year-old woman: "You can't let other people tell you how to handle it. Everybody handles it differently. You can't let people make you feel that what you feel is not valid."

Grief can be in the open or hidden. In some people, grief feelings are on the outside; for others the feelings are inside. People who keep feelings inside can seem like they don't care, but that's not it at all. They just don't or can't or would rather not express the feelings. People who express feelings can seem too emotional to people whose feelings are inside, but they are not too emotional. That's just the way they are. One 46-year-old woman talked about the struggles she and her husband had over their son's death. She grieved constantly and intensely, while her husband said to her, "If you'd just learn to accept that it's God's will, and just kinda keep going, get yourself busy, you won't think of it. And you'll be all right." Not only did they have to come to terms with their loss, they had to come to terms with their difference in grieving. *People who differ in how much they express emotion have to understand and accept their differences and understand that neither way is better.*

Some people need to speak about their grief, and some need to be silent. For people who prefer silence about a farm death, talk can be hard because they don't want to lose emotional control, because talking would hurt too much, because they can't stand to say or maybe even think some of what they would say, because they can't find the right words, or because they feel that words won't help. *That's another difference that is just there. There is no way that is best for everyone.*

Feelings of grief ebb and flow. *Don't be surprised if your grief feelings or the feelings of someone else in your family seem to disappear and then come back.* It may happen again and again. Sometimes people can feel that they have finally come to terms with a death, and then sharp feelings of grief return.

In grief we do and experience things that would seem strange at other times. We may, for example, think the same thoughts over and over again, cry uncontrollably, try to make deals with God, rage at God, wish to be dead, sleep much more than usual, not be able to sleep much at all, have frightening nightmares, have no appetite, or put on lots of weight. Some people sense the presence of the person who died. They may feel that the person who died is near them or can hear them; they may see or hear the person. These reactions and experiences and many others may seem strange to you, but they are common when people grieve.

There is no "right" time to be "done" grieving. Some people will tell you that you should be over grief by a certain time. If that advice works for you, good. But lots of people grieve much longer than the weeks, months, one year, or two years that somebody tells them they are supposed to grieve. In fact, many people feel that they never really get over a farming death. Their grief

comes back again and again. They may continue year after year to wonder about the accident or how things would be different in their own lives if the person had not died or what the person would be like now. Don't be pushed around by somebody else's "shoulds" about how long you should grieve.

Mystery about what really happened. Sometimes people know what caused a farm accident and sometimes not. You may repeatedly wonder about what really happened. You might not agree with the sheriff or coroner about the cause, and family members might not agree with one another. For some people, the mystery is always there, and their grief has elements of searching for clues and of again and again asking what happened.

The connection of grief to the farm. There are complications to grief after a fatal farm accident that are not present for most other deaths. For bereaved family members, the person killed may have been not only a family member but a co-worker, boss, or employee. That may add to the grief. Also, the farm may be a reminder of the loss in ways that at times can be very painful.

Anger and blame. Lots of people feel a mixture of anger and blame following a fatal farm accident. "You want to blame somebody, let me tell ya. You want to blame somebody because then there'd be somebody you'd be angry with (45-year-old woman)." You may feel angry with the person who was killed. You may blame others--why did my spouse leave the tractor key where the child could find it? Why did my son back up the equipment so carelessly? Why did grandpa leave the power take-off unshielded? Why did we keep a dangerous bull on the farm?

In families where there are feelings of blame and anger, different people often feel it differently. And typically it changes with time. Coming to terms with blaming and anger directed at yourself or with your own blame and anger directed at someone else can be a struggle. In the midst of blaming and anger, people lose track of all the positives in one another, how much the person they blame is hurting, and the possibilities for the future. *Acknowledging blame and anger is an important step in coming to terms with those feelings. Being patient with blame and anger is another step.*

Anger with God is common following a farming fatality. It is also very upsetting to some people. Some people fear that anger with God will alienate God or lock them in grief. A widow in her 60s spoke for many people who were interviewed when she said, "If you have faith, you accept these things." Some people who were angry with God came to terms with Him but others had not at the time they were interviewed.

Self-blame (or pain or wanting to be reunited with the person who died) can turn to thoughts of suicide. Suicide can't bring a dead person back. Suicide will make things far harder for other family members, and it will make it impossible to do the thousands of good things one will be able to do if one keeps on living. A

51-year-old man said, "In them four years after my daughter died there wasn't a day went by that I didn't think I'd kill myself. It's just been recently that I'm glad I didn't."

Isolation

Many people who lose a close family member in a farm accident become isolated for a while. At first they may receive lots of support from neighbors, friends, relatives, and even strangers. Food gifts may fill the freezer, and neighbors may help with farm chores. But after a while, the support drops away. The neighbors cannot continue helping with chores. Lots of people seem to avoid the grieving family, perhaps afraid of saying the wrong thing. Some people become impatient with the grieving family, as though grief is supposed to just disappear. People who offered support may no longer seem to want to give it. After a spouse's death, a person may feel unwelcome or uncomfortable at couple events. Whatever the reasons, you may feel that many people are drawing away from you.

Some of the bereaved people who talked about what happened following a farm death found one or a small number of people who still would be there for them. Some talked about making an effort to connect with others. For example, one woman in her fifties said:

"You can't sit back and wait for them to keep coming to you. A lot of people don't know what to say; they don't know what to do, and it's better if you go out and give them an opportunity."

Even if some people drop out of your life or act more distant, you still have it in your power to try to make connections.

For some people, the church is a great support--a pastor or priest who provides spiritual guidance and wisdom, a congregation that cares about its members and does lots of helpful things. For some people, the church is not a great support, but it is still there, familiar and stable. But some people have problems with the church--a clergy person who is insensitive, incompetent, or even blaming, a congregation that seems cold and uncaring. For some people, an unexpected challenge in dealing with their loss is confronting a clergy person or finding support in a congregation that does not on the surface seem supportive. Some people had to change churches or drew away, at least for a while, from organized religion.

Family members may draw apart from one another. In grieving, it may be hard to support one another. People may be more needy of things from other family members than they usually are, and more frustrated if their needs are not met. People may be depressed, distant, irritable, angry, hard to understand, and a lot of other things that may make them draw away or that may make others draw away. It may be hard to come to terms with differences centering around a farm death. *So don't be surprised if you and other family members are more distant from each other for a while.* Be patient with the process, understand that it's asking a great deal to expect people (you and your family members) who are

feeling strong grief feelings to be supportive and understanding. Sometimes people feel close even though distant, feeling like they know what one another feels and remembers. Family members who feel distant may still find ways to be close--a hug, a few words about the accident, a knowing look, praying side by side, touching each other. Later on they may connect more, may talk more about the death and about their memories, or may simply feel at home with one another.

Legal Hassles

Hassles about legal matters are common when there has been a fatal farm accident.

Investigating the accident. When a farming death occurs, some people are upset by a sheriff's or a deputy's questions about the accident. Some are upset about a coroner who seems insensitive, who doesn't carry out a thorough investigation, or who seems mistaken about what happened.

Insurance. People talked about insurance policies that were not what they seemed, and about having to deal with insurance companies that did not want to honor an insurance policy or that treated them as though they were greedy. Some people did not realize until too late that they were entitled to payments on a liability insurance policy. Some people did not want to make a claim or did not want to gain financially from the death, though most people who collected insurance money seemed to feel that good things came from the money.

Law suits. Some people sued an insurance company, equipment manufacturer, implement dealer, or neighbor who was responsible for the accident. Without exception, people said law suits were difficult. Some felt bullied by attorneys on the other side. Law suits do not necessarily bring money in, and no law suit can compensate for the death of a family member. But the money from an out-of-court settlement or a successful suit made a difference to some people.

In addition to coming to terms with the loss, you may have to be on your toes about insurance, the law, and people who may want to take advantage of you. Some people had to deal with lawyers who took advantage of them or gave them bad advice, auctioneers eager to profit from the sale of an estate, insurance agents eager to help them invest insurance proceeds, and others (even friends and relatives) who seemed to want to take advantage of them. A 53-year-old woman talked about her experiences: "I think I had my head kind of like an ostrich, with your head in the sand. I accepted people as they presented themselves to me, but there's too many wearing masks."

Economic Changes

The death of the farm operator or of someone else whose work was critical to the farm operation adds very serious economic problems on top of all the other problems. Often survivors are forced to make major economic decisions almost immediately. "I had to make so many changes immediately that I think it

was really a lot harder" (woman who was widowed in her 40s). The economic burdens of the loss can be very serious. The changes that must be made are often an additional source of grief, as people dispose of animals, machinery, and sometimes even the farm.

Sometimes the changes that are required after a fatal farm accident force someone (a teenager, a young adult) to take on more responsibility for the farm than he or she can comfortably handle. Sometimes the changes that are required mean that someone who had hoped to take over the farm someday will lose that future. Sometimes a farm death means that older family members lose the retirement they planned for. These sorts of situations give grieving farm families additional losses and frustrations. Dealing with these losses and frustrations takes time, patience, and sometimes a lot of talking. People may have hard feelings about those changes for a long time, and their feelings may be entangled with their grief and other feelings about the death. However, if family members know that the additional complications are there and that the feelings happen in situations such as that, it can make it easier to hang in there and come through to the other side with good relationships.

Advice from Survivors

Some people who talked about dealing with a fatal farm accident had advice on how to deal with things. One thing people said was: Don't make radical changes for a while if you can avoid it. Some people have to make big changes quickly— particularly if the death means a crucial person's work on the farm is lost— but people said hold off if at all possible on big changes like selling the farm or moving to a new house. When grief is fresh, you are not in the best place to make major life decisions.

Some survivors said that after a while, days or weeks or months, you may want to get out into the world more. You may want to visit people, volunteer for things, go places, join an organization, and so on. At first it may seem strange, and some things may not work out, but sooner or later, people say, you will find what feels like the right thing to do.

Tolerate difference in your family. Family members may feel differently about the loss, express their feelings differently, have different understandings of what happened, have different understandings about what the death means, and have different ideas about what the normal grief process is. Part of getting along in the family when a farm death occurs is understanding that differences are inevitable and o.k.

Tolerate the grieving (yours, other people's). Grieving is hard. You can't necessarily speed the process up; you have to let it happen. Sometimes you will be feeling or thinking things you will think you can never escape, and sometimes other family members will seem stuck. Sometimes you may be in such terrible pain that it seems unbearable, and sometimes other family members will seem in such terrible pain that you feel desperate to help them or can't stand to be near

them. Be patient with the process.

For some people, talk is a crucial part of grieving. If you are one of those people, talk to someone who will listen. If people in the immediate family are all wrestling with their own grief, or even if they are not, you may have to go outside the immediate family to find a listener. If you are a listener, accept what you hear and accept that the other person may be different from you.

Maybe all the advice people had to offer about how a family should deal with a farming death could be captured in two words offered by a 53-year-old woman: "Stick together."

Finding Help

There is a lot of help out there. More than half the people who talked about their experiences sooner or later found a support group, a counselor, a class, a psychologist, or some other kind of professional help in dealing with things. Some tried several different sources of professional help. They found out about the sources of help from friends, relatives, school counselors, funeral directors, their doctor, a member of the clergy, the phone book, a community crisis line, a clinic, or the newspaper. Lots of people who went for help said that they had never done that kind of thing before, had strong doubts about it, but eventually found it very helpful. Said a 51-year-old widow: "I was always a real independent person, where I could handle whatever comes along. Well, this came along and I couldn't handle it. When I went to that support group at first I wasn't going to tell everybody everything, but you do. And I think it really helps."

Of course, a lot of quality help is available from friends, relatives, neighbors, and even strangers. You have to be open to it, and you may have to ask for it. But it's there.

Some people find things to read that make a difference. But what works for one may not work for another. There were dozens of things people found to read that made a difference. The one people mentioned the most as helpful (though other people hated it) is a book called *When Bad Things Happen to Good People,* by Harold Kushner. Other books that people found helpful included the Bible, *The Bereaved Parent* by Harriet Schiff, *What Helped Me When My Loved One Died* by Earl A. Grollman, and *An Angel on My Shoulder* by Roy Rogers and Dale Evans. One person found articles by Val Farmer in *The Farm Wife News* to be helpful. There are many other helpful publications available from the public library or a bookstore. A member of the clergy, a funeral director, or someone else who has gone through a bereavement may also suggest helpful publications.

You may be able to help others. Sooner or later, one thing that is valuable to lots of people is connecting with others who are in the same or a similar boat. You may connect with other people who have had losses, though not in farm accidents. You may even find others who have had very similar farm

accident losses. Talking with them can help to put your own experience in perspective and give you a lot of wisdom and understanding. Also, you may be able to help others come to terms with their own losses. Your experiences and perspectives can be of real help to others who are hurting.

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