SOMETHING IS WRONG WITH MY CHILD

He (or she) is not grieving right

BOB BAUGHER, PH.D. | bbaugher@highline.edu

What does it mean to grieve right?

What does it mean to "grieve right"?

Over the past 3 decades much of the research on bereavement has broadened the concept of grief from shock and denial and active expressions of sadness, guilt, anger, and tears to include the thoughts and actions that on the surface may not resemble our concept of grief.

Some researchers have criticized society's tendency to use open displays of grief as the model or template for the way all people should grieve.

The part of the statement that reads, "They're just not grieving," is an assumption that no grief is taking place.

Think of the last time someone in your life wasn't doing something you thought s/he should. It could have been someone who wasn't showing up on time, not completing a task, or not displaying grief. What could cause such a reaction?

Research on the way people cope with emotional upheaval suggests that they either **can't** show a full range of emotions (because they have no reaction or because the reaction is somehow internally blocked) or they **won't** show their emotions.

THEY CAN'T

Because each person is wired differently, the **can't** approach assumes that some are incapable of grieving in demonstrative, observable ways.

When the death of a sibling or parent occurs in the life of a young person, we expect reactions that involve tears or other outward displays of emotion.

Weeks or months following the death of his sister, a male may be asked, "Since your sister died, what feelings have you been having?" He may shrug and say, "I don't' know," or "I'm not sure what I'm feeling." Perhaps he discovered that talking about his grief led him to feel worse.

One reason for little or no display of anger might be due to his belief that his anger may scare some people, including himself. So in an almost involuntary way he suppresses his anger.

As another example of why a person doesn't show outward emotional grief reactions is seen in the following example. Let's say an older sibling experiences the death of her younger brother. As firstborn, she may at first channel her grief reactions into trying to find ways to help and support her family. As she discovers that grief isn't fixable, she may feel like a failure—adding to her grief.

Another example of **can't** is *learned helplessness*. Upon realizing that virtually nothing can be done to ease the pain of the family, let alone one's own pain, some bereaved siblings appear to give up.

Their thinking goes something like this: "I get knocked down. I get up. I get knocked down. I get up again and again and again. After awhile I say, why should I even try anymore?" This passive reaction to the death is scary to parents. What can be done?

THEY WON'T

In this case the internal dialogue of the person in grief may go something like this:

"I'm feeling confused, guilty, depressed, and angry about the death of brother, but I won't show what I'm feeling to those around me because I'll look weak or I'll cause others who are concerned about me more pain."

We all know the reasons behind such a belief. Most children don't want to cause their bereaved parents any more pain. So, they hide much of their grief. No parent wants to see their child break down, cry, and become overwhelmed with emotion.

So, on one hand we become co-conspirators in the pretense that perhaps our child is really doing okay. Then what do we do?

We complain that they're not grieving, we worry that their grief will show up at some point in the future, and we bemoan the fact that they're not grieving like us. As you can see, you cannot have it both ways. You can't wish this person emoting all over the place and yet seemingly doing okay.

Perhaps you're thinking, *"He doesn't have to emote. Just show me a little emotion. Just tell me a little more often (or at least once this year) that he misses his brother (or sister), that he would give anything to turn back time. All I want is just a little more than I'm getting."*

Sound familiar? Well, I've talked to many parents who did get a little more. And what did this mom or dad want after they got more? You guessed it: more!

Let me put it another way: no parent has come up to me and said, "*You know, Bob, since the death of my child, my other children are grieving just right. They are crying just the right amount of tears, displaying the perfect degree of anger, and feeling the appropriate level of guilt."*

Instead, I get, "I'm worried. He doesn't seem to be grieving."

Your child **is** grieving. S/he just isn't doing it the way you'd like, the way perhaps you expected, the way you'd hoped.

Even though you understand the logic in all this, you will continue to worry. Go ahead. Almost nothing can reduce your worry except perhaps the passage of time, during which you will see that despite this horrible tragedy that has forever changed your family, your child is moving on with life the best way he or she can.

In the context of all this, what can you do?

Here are some suggestions from parents who've shared with me what helped them as they watched their surviving children:

1. Respect your child's individuality. Yes, in some ways your child is like you. However, in the final analysis, this person has a unique personality—one that will greatly affect the course of their grief.
2. Understand that, as your child moves through developmental stages of life, he or she will begin to see their grief, their sibling, and of course life in new ways.
3. Your child had—and in some ways still has—a unique relationship with your deceased child. As difficult as this will be, give your child the room to struggle, to deny, to hide grief from you with late-night thoughts of unrelenting regret and memories, to sometimes quietly search for meaning that may never come, and to come to see the death of someone loved as a way to deeply cherish what it means to be a family.
3. Look for articles, books, DVDs, YouTube, TV, lectures, and support groups that will give your child insight into their own grief. *We Need Not Walk Alone* is an excellent resource for articles on sibling grief. So is opentohope.org. During the past 40 years that I have taught a college course titled *Death & Life* I have had hundreds of bereaved siblings who chose to delve deeply into the life and death of their sibling and the ensuing grief that followed over the years. Trust me: as demonstrated by these students of all ages, it's never too late to revisit your grief. Never.
4. Find time to have a grief chat. Because your child is not forced to look you in the eye, the phone can be an excellent way to bring up the question, "How are you doing with your brother/sister's death?" Try it.
5. Be a good listener. When you ask the question, "How are you doing with your brother's death?" your **very** next response is to shut up and listen. Yes, listen, listen, listen without judgment. This is the absolute best thing you can do for your child. As you've learned many times over your lifetime, you learn much more when you listen.
6. Remember: Your surviving child or children will very likely be living with their grief longer than you will; and in their own way they will adapt, cope, and adjust to their new normal. Your job is to find a way to ease up on some of your expressed or unexpressed expectations, to let your child know that your love is solid, and that you trust that this child will live a life that not only you, but his or her deceased sibling would be proud of.