

## Mourning A Loss

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**A**s a family therapist and psychologist I recognize that certain family compositions and situations are fraught with treacherous emotions. Although there is no plan or pattern that all stepfamilies follow, regardless of how similar their situations may be, certain problems frequently match particular family types. To those families that match the profile, but not the described emotions, I offer my apologies for my presumption. For many therapists and stepfamilies, however, I believe that the details described will seem surprisingly familiar and the intervention helpful.

Some stepfamilies come to therapy with great intensity of emotion. A family type that often exhibits its turmoil is one in which a woman marries a widowed father with children between eight and eighteen. These families often come to therapy discussing one child's problem, or they may actually be brought in because the stepmother feels that "this family has to mourn its loss." The stepmother is often conflicted; she really does "feel" for the children's loss, and she is aware that the family's inability to mourn adds to her own isolation. Without having mourned the loss of their mother, and in the husband's case, his former wife, it is difficult for the family members to view the stepmother objectively. She is either consciously ignored or else her efforts are perceived as unhelpful. This frequent interpersonal dynamic should not be blamed on either party; such a situation often results when a new individual joins a family that has suffered a profound loss.

Although the therapist recognizes the inherent truth in the stepmother's statement that the family needs to mourn in order to heal, to join her completely in this mission is destined to cause some consternation. The importance of mourning such a loss is almost universally accepted. But the issue now is who is generating and insisting upon this mission, and how is this assignment responded to by the family? Hence, a reasonable concern and referral by the stepmother is rendered volatile because of what it represents.

How can the therapist not appear to be siding with the stepmother? Is it wrong to side with the stepmother, especially if she is correct? This commentary is not intended to question the importance of the stepmother's advice. In fact, much of good therapy takes the strong feelings of each person involved and finds a way to help

people share these strong feelings with each other. This particular topic, however, has built-in traps. If the children and father in a stepmother family do not accept the premise that they need to mourn, the therapist needs to articulate the dilemma; as the stepmother becomes more adamant that the family must mourn, the family understands the truth of the message, but is unable to begin the process on demand. In fact, in this situation the process of mourning might be delayed.

It is with great compassion that I experience the stepfamily's feelings and concerns. In most cases no one is feeling good about the tremendous tension in the home. But since stepfamilies are frequently at a loss to explain the origin of their strong negative feelings, a system of attack and withdrawal becomes standard behavior. The therapist is suddenly embroiled in the predicament that is currently affecting the family. Advice from a concerned neighbor that father and children seek counseling might have been viewed as supportive and resulted in motivating the family to explore their feelings of loss, whereas the same advice from a stepmother is reacted to defensively. "If I mourn my mother's death, am I opening a place in my heart for my stepmother?" This question, which can seem extremely benign, then is replaced with, "if I do find a spot for my stepmother in my heart, isn't that dishonoring my mom?" These concerns begin to lock the child(ren) into a pattern of resisting the process of mourning because it is no longer strictly in the service of honoring one's mother and moving on with life; instead, it now represents a betrayal.

It is my opinion that dilemmas such as this demand that the therapist extricate himself or herself from the family's definition of therapist as mediator. There is no happy medium in this situation. This issue represents a dichotomy, which by definition represents two mutually exclusive positions. Therefore, in order to assist the family, the therapist must fully explain the dilemma to the stepfamily. In explaining, use qualifiers to insure that at no time do you label their feelings without their agreement. Hold the stance that neither group or individual is acting to hurt the other, rather, each person is trapped in trying to move on, honor others, feel included, and be allowed to be an individual.

The therapist needs to be able to support each person in the search to resolve painful issues. Those concerns which affect the child (ren) and husband are quite dif-

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## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

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can be important."

By now, I hope that Christy Borgeld has framed and hung two Presidential Proclamations on her wall. Why? Thanks to endless hours working on an issue that is dear to her heart, Christy convinced President Clinton to include *stepmothers* in his Mother's Day Proclamation and *stepfathers* in his Father's Day Proclamation this year for the very first time. Using the Internet, Christy gathered project supporters including governors and other elected officials, organizations dedicated to working with families, and stepfamily members throughout the United States. Husband Jim admits, "I'm blown away that she has done all this from our home!"

Christy had four children from a previous marriage when she met Jim and his two children. In telling me about her family, Christy commented, "We wanted a child together so now we really have a bunch!" Married

for six years this past July 1st, the children range in age from five to 15. Christy's parents were role models for community and charity work and this Wyoming, MI, mom continues the tradition by involving her children in service projects.

Jim is clearly enamored of his wife. He told me, "Without getting mushy, I've never met such a person who was creative, dedicated, full of energy, and when she gets an idea, she goes to the top." True to form, Christy is going to the top once again. This time, she is gathering support for prompting President Clinton to proclaim September 16th as National Stepfamily Day.

I have the pleasure of working with these talented, caring people, who share a commitment to stepfamilies, love this organization, and respect its members. They are helping us to break through walls of silence and to change attitudes about stepfamilies. They're reminding us that being in a stepfamily is truly a remarkable opportunity for a diverse and fulfilling family experience. □

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## COUNSELOR'S CORNER

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ferent from those being felt by the stepmother. In commenting on these individual needs, you reinforce the importance of clarifying for each person that no action by the other will remove entirely the pain felt by each individual. You may need to address these needs in sub-system sessions in order to allow the process to proceed

without the contextual dynamic which produced the dilemma. In time the work toward integration of this family will become the priority, and the family members should be ready. □

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## RESEARCH UPDATE

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face children and adults living in stepfamilies" (p. 296). Importantly such assessments should take into consideration the perspective of all family members, including resident and nonresident members. At the least, programs should collect client satisfaction information so program developers have some basis of assessing what is and is not working in a particular program. In addition, documenting the instructional process will be a key for wider use of programs and will allow for more effective replication. Lastly, they suggest that systematic evaluations of program outcomes be undertaken that include comparison groups of nonparticipants. This same recommendation has been offered by program

developers of divorce education programs for parents and children, and few such programs have done so. However, if we are to know whether the program results in meeting desired goals, such evaluations are essential. □

For more information on the programs reviewed, see: Hughes, R., Jr., & Schroeder, J.D. (1997), Family life education programs for stepfamilies, *Journal of Divorce & Remarriage*, 26(314), 281-300.

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