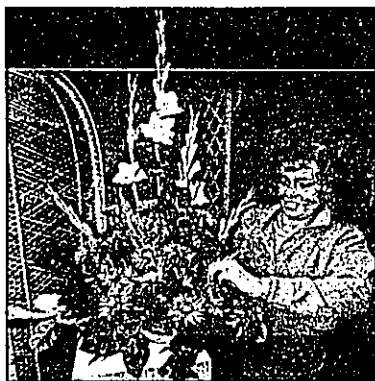


Grieving



STEVE FECHT/staff photographer

Leigh Nagy of French's Flowers in Livonia puts the finishing touches on a traditional funeral arrangement.

Flowers hold special message for bereaved

By C.L. Rugenstein
special writer

THOUGH MEMORIAL donations in the name of a deceased friend or relative are the trend today, floral tributes still play an important part in extending sympathy and support to bereaved families.

"Flowers are a visual expression of love and respect," said Bud Lipinski, vice president of floral wire service Industry Development Services. "Most families do want flowers at a funeral — they just don't want to be inundated with them."

Lipinski speaks from 40 years experience coordinating floral tributes for the funerals of notables like Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey, Colonel Sanders and Elvis Presley.

Flowers create a background of warmth and beauty, Lipinski feels, which adds to the dignity and consolation of the funeral service. They also help a family deal with the reality of death by the comfort generated by friends' thoughtfulness.

Lipinski recalled an incident related to him by a local funeral director, in which flowers played an important part in helping a wife deal with the death of her husband.

"IT WAS AN UNEXPECTED death, a construction accident," Lipinski said. "The wife was so distraught she wouldn't allow anything in the room with her husband, not even an American flag."

When she arrived later, however, and saw the bareness of the room, she called a florist and ordered flowers herself, also allowing the funeral director to bring back floral tributes already sent by friends.

"There's a lot of anger when a death is unexpected," Lipinski explained. "At those times it's very difficult to work with a family. But after they begin to realize what's happening, they begin to change their minds about a lot of things."

Lasting Distress

Effects of bereavement haunt many

MOST AMERICANS tend to think that after the death of a loved one, survivors suffer a relatively short period of grief and then "get over it" with the passage of months or years. University of Michigan researchers dispute such beliefs.

A study by Camille B. Wortman and Darrin R. Lehman of the U-M Institute for Social Research revealed that accidental death of a child or spouse inflicts psychic pain on survivors that is more serious — and longer-lasting — than is commonly believed.

They found that the effects of bereavement haunt many survivors for as long as seven years after a fatal accident.

Wortman and Lehman interviewed 40 individuals who had lost a spouse in a motor vehicle crash and 54 parents who similarly lost a child, matching each group with a control sample. Their research was supported by the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety.

BOTH SPOUSES and parents, interviewed four to seven years after their loss, usually had not "worked through" the loss or otherwise come to grips with it.

Death of a spouse or child is one of the most stressful events that a person can experience during the course of his or her life, the U-M researchers note. Death of a spouse appeared to be even more traumatic than that of a child, possibly because a spouse's death also eliminates a source of support.

Sudden accidental death can

result in survivors experiencing symptoms beyond the expected grief and sense of loss. The U-M study showed that they suffered variously from diminished well-being, anxiety, alienation from friends and relatives, deterioration in job performance and income. Divorce (in a parent group) and death rates were increased.

Employment effects were evident. Among surviving spouses, only 36 percent were still working at the same job when interviewed, compared to 55 percent of the control group. Among parents, only 38 percent continued to hold the same job, compared with 68 percent of the control group.

EIGHT OF THE 54 parents interviewed had been divorced since their child's death. In the control group only one divorce was recorded.

A large percentage of the respondents (from 30 to 85 percent, depending on the question) continued to dwell on the accident or what they might have done to prevent it. They appeared unable to accept/resolve or find any meaning in the loss.

It is possible, the researchers suggest, that many people continue the psychological work of mourning their deceased loved ones for the rest of their lives.

"**OUR DATA CLEARLY** indicate that, following the traumatic loss of one's spouse or child, lasting distress is a normative response to the situation, not a sign of individual coping failure,"

Wortman and Lehman explain.

Americans, the U-M researchers say, generally consider expressions of grief for more than a short time after a loss to be unusual and inappropriate. "We feel that the expression of distress four to seven years later is all the more remarkable in light of the implicit social pressures to be recovered from the loss."

Psychological theory holds that most bereaved people not only recover from the loss but "work through" their grief so as to free themselves from the former attachment.

"**OUR RESULTS,**" Wortman and Lehman say, "provide little support for either of these views. This study provides evidence that experiencing a sudden, unexpected loss can result in enduring difficulties."

Sixty-seven percent of the spouses and 53 percent of the parents told the U-M researchers that they have not made any sense of the tragedy at all or rationalized any meaning in the death.

Using national norms to assess psychological well-being, Wortman and Lehman found that bereaved spouses were virtually indistinguishable from psychiatric outpatients on six of nine measures.

Longer-range studies, they add, will be needed to see whether their respondents "will gradually show some improvement or whether they will continue to exhibit the same amount of distress for the rest of their lives."