

## Grief or Greed? When Families Fight Over Material Possessions

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The death of a loved one can have a major impact on family unity. Each individual family member must reconcile the end of their physical relationship with the person who died and their ongoing grief over the loss. Unfortunately, this often means that at a time when the family could benefit from being closer than ever, misunderstandings and differences set them at a distance.

Many families have wound up befuddled when, after the death of loved one, they find themselves at odds over the person's material possessions. As a family, they typically don't express their love through gifts, objects, or money. Their values have never been grounded in materialism in any way. Yet all of a sudden they are arguing over *stuff*; much of it *stuff* they hadn't cared about or wanted until after their loved one died.

Some people are opportunistic and greedy. I won't try and deny this reality. I've written for a grief website long enough to have heard the horror stories and, frankly, some of them *will* threaten to destroy your faith in humanity. However, I'm also aware of quite a few scenarios in which people's actions have been labeled as selfish when, in reality, the motives behind them were far more complex than assumed.

Honestly, grief can make us all a little egocentric and it can be difficult to see another person's feeling, actions, and grief reactions from any perspective but our own. There's [research to suggest](#) that two common grief responses, anxiety and uncertainty, can increase a person's tendency to assume that others see things exactly as they do.

Our human brains are even more predisposed to making assumptions about people who we are close with and who we perceive as similar to us – like family members – perhaps because we assume these people share the same values, attitudes, and worldview.

Further, [as we've noted before](#), the fundamental attribution error commonly causes people to attribute the behavior of others to personal traits – in these instances, traits like greed and selfishness – rather than taking the time to consider social, emotional, or situational influences on behavior.

In this article, we'd like to consider the influences *beyond selfishness and greed* that might explain your family member's feelings and behavior related to a deceased loved one's material possessions.

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### 1. Different feelings about when and if belongings should be put away:

A common misunderstanding after the death of a loved one occurs when one family member is ready to put away, sell, or get rid of the deceased person's belongings and another is not. The family member who is *not* ready may feel that the other person is pushy, callous, uncaring, greedy, or ready to move on much too quickly. However, there are a number of other explanations for their behavior, including (but not limited to):

- **People grieve at their own pace:** One family member might feel ready to go through a loved one's belongings, while another can't stand the thought of it. Neither is right or wrong, they may just be grieving at different paces.
- **Different grieving styles:** Although people typically think of emotions when they think about grief, some people grieve in a much more hands on way. Researchers call these types of people, [instrumental grievers](#). Instrumental grievers might feel better when they are taking action or *doing* something in their grief and one thing they can *do* is take care of their loved one's personal belongings.
- **Avoidance:** Some people have a difficult time being around their deceased loved one's belongings. These objects can bring up a lot of difficult emotion and, for many, become painful grief triggers. In an effort to avoid these triggers, certain family members may want to put away their loved one's belongings right away. To those who see these objects differently, putting them away quickly may be perceived as uncaring when in actuality it comes from intense caring.

### 2. Sentimentality

It's funny, some of the objects that become [special and significant](#) after a loved one's death. If your family member is making a grab for specific items that belonged to your loved one, it may be because those items (sometimes inexplicably) have come to mean a lot to the person.

### 3. Continuing Bonds

In the days, weeks, and months following a loss, a sense of longing for the security and comfort of a loved one's physical presence may be especially salient. In these early days, the idea of never seeing a loved one again is slowly becoming a reality. At the same time, people often feel insecure about their ability to maintain an ongoing connection with their deceased loved one and so they hold on *very* tight to physical reminders of them for fear that their memories are going to fade and their loved one will disappear. During these times, [continuing bonds](#) behavior

may be used to maintain a sense of *physical closeness* to the person who has died and may involve stashing some of their physical objects.

#### **4. The estate plans feel like a statement of love and/or value:**

Many people go to great lengths to make their estate plans known to their family. By doing so, they hopefully ensure their last words to family and friends are not those that are contained in a will. When these conversations happen, people have the opportunity to explain and clarify their intent and those impacted are able to ask questions. In many instances, this can eliminate lingering hurt feelings, unanswered questions, and sometimes worse, after the person dies. This is why so many professionals and organizations are out there advocating for people to *make their wishes known!*

That said, in many (many, many) instances people do not discuss their end-of-life wishes and estate plans for many (many, many) understandable reasons. This doesn't always cause a problem. However, if the estate turns out to be surprising or unfair, those who are surprised or left out may interpret their loved one's decisions as a statement of love or value (whether it is rational or not). Worse, it may cause confusion, questioning, resentment, or bitterness among surviving family members. Unfortunately, the only person who can explain the decision is gone and so people are left to try to make sense of things on their own.

#### **5. Beliefs about what their deceased loved one would have wanted:**

Family members typically want to [do right by their deceased loved one](#) and honor their wishes to the best of their ability. The problem is, as we've just established, people don't always walk around making their end of life wishes known to their family and friends. Even if they have discussed some things, it's sometimes impossible to cover *everything* down to what you want to be done with your necktie collection. Ultimately, some decisions will need to be made, and in the absence of clarity, there are times when people are left speculating and, unfortunately, disagreeing about what the person would have wanted for their affairs and personal effects.

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