

A Death in the Family: The Differential Impacts of Losing a Loved One

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Abstract

This paper will look at how the death of an immediate family member affects the surviving family members, as well as how it impacts the family structure. The death of a parent, the death of a spouse, the death of a child, and the death of a sibling will all be examined and compared to see how these different situations impact different members of the family. Variables such as age, gender, and relation to the deceased turn out to be important predictive factors in how an individual copes with the loss. The family structure must be reorganized after the loss of one of its members, but how families go about this restructuring differs immensely. How the family is restructured has major implications for how the family is able function after the death. Learning how both individuals and family units grieve the loss of an immediate family member and examining the differences, can lead to a better understanding of what grieving processes are the most effective.

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Introduction

Death is a significant and traumatic life event that is virtually a universal experience as the majority of people experience the death of at least one loved one in their lifetime. The death of a family member greatly impacts the rest of the surviving family members. Every death is unique in its own way, so each death should impact people differently. Large individual differences also exist among the surviving family members, so these individual characteristics should influence how individuals are affected and how they grieve the loss. This also means that different family members should grieve the loss differently and therefore face different outcomes. When looking at families as a whole, it is clear that there are major differences between families, meaning there should be differences in how family units cope with the death of one of its members. The circumstances surrounding the death, as well as characteristics of the surviving individual affects how that family and its individual members grieve the loss. Factors such as age, gender, relationship to the deceased, how the individual died, and how the family is structured will all be examined in the context of the death of an immediate family member.

Literature Review

Although death is experienced in many different ways by people, there are generally common emotions and processes of grief that occur. Clay (1976) finds some common processes following the death of a loved one in American culture:

In most cases, the bereaved are in a state of shock for the first week or so after the death. This is the period of time when most ritual activity occurs. When the second stage of mourning, the period of most intense distress, takes place emotional and social supports are lacking. The family members are left on their own to cope with all the perfectly normal feelings that they have: feelings of grief, loss, separation-anxiety; anger, rage, and resentment; feelings of loneliness, relief, perhaps disorientation; and feelings of guilt (p. 181).

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Many individual's experience of death in the family is influenced by the type of support they have available to them. So, while the relationship to the person and the age of the both the deceased and the survivor matter, the support the survivor receives is also vitally important in the mourning process and outcomes.

Family Structure and Functioning

Certain factors contribute to how well the family as a whole is able to function after the death of a family member. When families show openness after the death of a loved one they are better able to cope effectively and therefore better able to function as a family. Openness includes each individual member being able to talk about the death and their feelings about the death openly with the rest of the family (Davies, Spinetta, Martinson, McClowry, & Kulenkamp, 1986). When families focus on the system rather than on individuals, they function more effectively following the death. This involves acknowledging how all members of the family feel and how they are grieving the loss, not just focusing on how one feels after the death. This allows the family to have empathy for each member as well as allowing them to be able to meet the unique needs of each individual, as everyone grieves differently (Davies et al., 1986). Functional families after death are also associated with those who take advantage of available resources. Resources may include close friends, people in the community, and even counselling services (Davies et al., 1986). Another key to having a high functioning family after death, is being able to accept vulnerability. The acceptance and allowance of many different emotions allows people to grieve in healthier ways. It is important for members of the family to not only allow themselves to feel sad but also allow themselves to feel happy and have good days (Davies et al., 1986). While individuals cope differently following the death of a family member, the

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family as a unit is better able to function when there is openness among the members, acknowledgement of the circumstances, as well as allowance of vulnerability.

After the death of a family member, the structure of that family inevitably changes. While some families might insist of keeping things the same as before the individual has passed, this is highly unrealistic and leads to a lower level of family functioning (Davies et al., 1986). Other families may become rigid in the reorganizing of the family structure following the death of a family member. This may include forcing some members to take on the role of deceased individual (Davies et al., 1986). This could mean making an older sibling take on the role of a deceased parent, or forcing a child to fill the role of a lost sibling. This rigid reorganization of the family structure is also associated with a lower level of family functioning. The most effective form of reorganization seems to be when it is flexible. When certain members are not forced to take on specific roles, but rather these roles become filled more naturally by different members, the family generally functions better (Davies et al., 1986). While the reorganization of the family structure is inevitable after the death of one of its members, the way this reorganization occurs impacts the level of family functioning.

The loss of a child in the family has incredible repercussions for the family structure, and both the surviving parents and the surviving siblings are heavily impacted. When a child dies, the effects of that loss last for many years down the road as the entire family structure and the family dynamics are altered (Dickens, 2013, p. 123). While parents are grieving the death of the child, the surviving siblings are left with a large burden to carry. These siblings often suppress their feelings and emotions about the death as they do not want to bring up the topic of the death to their parents because they do not want to further upset them or burden them (Dickens, 2013, p. 123). Surviving siblings also may also face an additional burden as they may feel the need to

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take over the deceased child's role in the family (Dickens, 2013, p. 123). This may mean taking on additional chores to help around the house as well as, for older siblings, helping with the caretaking of younger siblings. The family dynamics following the death of a child change dramatically, and while all family members are impacted, surviving siblings are often forced to carry a large burden within the family.

Death of a Spouse

After the death of a spouse, the remaining spouse faces many difficulties and health-related problems, especially in the first year after the death. When health was examined and compared in the year before and after the death, a drastic increase of health-related problems can be seen (Pennebaker & O'Heeron, 1984, p. 475). Individuals who talked and confided in closer friends following the death are more likely to have less health-related problems (Pennebaker & O'Heeron, 1984, p. 475). The more individuals thought about the death, the further health problems increased. However, talking with friends seemed to decrease the amount that the individual thought deeply about the death (Pennebaker & O'Heeron, 1983, p.475). No matter what the cause of death is, individuals who face the loss of a spouse do experience increased health problems (p. 476). The death of a spouse has many negative effects on the surviving spouse, and these effects generally result in overall poorer health.

The loss of a spouse has many implications for the surviving spouse, especially when that couple has children together. Parenting, following the death of a spouse, must change to accommodate for the now single-parent family. The surviving spouse loses support that they once had from the other spouse, making parenting much more difficult. A routine is often lost as the family structure is forced to change, creating a period of uncertainty for both the surviving spouse and the children (Glazer, Clark, Thomas, & Haxton, 2010, p. 534). The surviving spouse

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also faces an additional burden because they often feel that they need to fill the role of the deceased spouse, that is, they need to be both 'mom' and 'dad' (Glazer et al., 2010, p. 534). This burden is almost never lifted as it is not possible to completely fill the role of the deceased spouse. After the death of a spouse, the surviving spouse is forced to change parenting styles as the family structure and family dynamics have inevitably changed.

Negative outcomes after the death of a spouse are present, and the death a spouse is associated with increased risk of behaviors such as suicide. The risk of committing suicide is the highest in the first year following the death of a spouse. There are, however, gender differences, as the risk is much higher for men than it is for women. While the risk is highest during the first year and this risk decreases in the following years, it still remains higher in individuals who have lost a spouse than in married individuals (Lusyne & Page, 2008, p. 60). Another big gender difference that is seen is in whether the presence of dependent children affects the risk of suicide. For men who have dependent children, the presence of these children does not prevent them from committing suicide. For women, having dependent children has the opposite effect. Women who have dependent children are less likely to commit suicide (Lusyne & Page, 2008, p. 60). The risk of suicide following the death of a spouse is also associated with age. Younger surviving spouses are at a higher risk for committing suicide than older surviving spouses (Lusyne & Page, 2008, p. 61). Following the death of a spouse, the surviving spouse is at an elevated risk for committing suicide, although age and gender differences are important factors when looking at the presence of dependent children.

Certain support systems and situations are more conducive to coping with the loss of a spouse. The most helpful support for a surviving spouse generally comes from close family members, including their own children, as well as close friends (Kaunonen, Tarkka, Paunonen, &

Laippala, 1999, p. 1307). When the surviving spouse is given the opportunity to freely discuss their feelings and emotions and is shown empathy, that individual is better able to grieve and cope with the death of their spouse (Kaunonen et al., 1999, p. 1307). Having children that are dependent on them actually helps the grieving process as this kind of responsibility makes them feel needed and gives their life purpose (Kaunonen et al., 1999, p. 1307). After the death of a spouse, certain support systems are necessary to properly grieve and cope with the loss.

Death of a Parent

Young Children

Losing a parent is always a tough experience, whether you are a young child or a grown adult. Elementary-school aged children who have dealt with the loss of a parent report many emotions including sadness, anger, and surprisingly even happiness (Eppler, 2008, p. 192). While most of these emotions are not surprising, as most people associate sadness and anger with death, happiness can be more complex when looking deeper at how it is experienced in relation to death. Children who report feeling happiness after the death of a parent, experience this feeling in different and even opposing ways. Some feel happiness when the deceased parent is remembered because that child is recalling fond memories they have of that parent. Others report feeling happiness when they were not thinking of the parent, and have their mind off the topic of death and that parent (Eppler, 2008, p. 192). Along with these emotions, fear and anxiety are also themes in young children who have experienced the loss of a parent. Anxiety is commonly expressed because they feel anxious that they are alone now that their parent is gone (Eppler, 2008, p. 193). Many individual differences exist in children coping with the loss of a parent, and although there are many common emotions felt by these children, when and how these emotions are felt differ depending on the child.

While negative emotions are felt by young children after the death of a parent, some positive emotions and reactions are also seen. Most children stress their resilience, strength, and normalcy. They do not want to be treated differently than other children who have not lost a parent, and they want everyone to know just how strong and resilient they are despite what they have gone through. Most children also note that they feel that they are not only just going to survive the situation, but that they are also going to thrive because of it (Eppler, 2008, p. 193). It is important to note that the majority of these children that these conclusions are based upon have access to effective support systems including support from surviving parents, siblings, extended family, teachers, and peers. For those who do not have access to support systems, outcomes may look different. Outcomes are not always negative for children, as many show a strong resiliency, but this can be heavily dependent of the type of resources the child has access to.

The age of the young child who experiences the death of a parent is important because it may determine how much they comprehend. Depending on the age of the child when the parent dies, the child may not old enough to comprehend death. Not being able to fully understand death often leads to confusion for these children (Koblenz, 2015, p. 215). Many children who lose a parent report feeling that their life has completely changed and that people treat them differently now. Children are often forced to grow up much faster than any of their peers that have not lost a parent, increasing the amount of social isolation that child might feel, because they see themselves as different. They may feel uncomfortable discussing the death of their parent with their peers because they are feel as though they will not understand or be able to support them. However, over time, many children realize that having proper support is extremely important in the grieving process and they learn to accept the support that is available to them (Koblenz, 2015). Another important understanding children often come to is that it does get

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easier over time, but grieving is lifelong (Koblenz, 2015). Following the death of a parent, children may feel isolated from peers, but over time they begin to realize it is important to turn to peers for support, as it is necessary for the grieving process to move forward.

For school-age children who lose a parent it is important to look at the outcomes of the death as it pertains to school and education. When looking at countries such as Indonesia, where children are not mandated to go to school, research shows that children who lose a parent have significantly higher drop-out rates when compared to peers who have not lost a parent (Gertler, Levine, & Ames, 2004, p. 217). Eldest daughters who have younger siblings seem to be affected most by the loss of a parent when it comes to school, as they are much more likely to drop out. This is consistent with the idea that the eldest daughter is expected to help out with younger siblings and household chores in the absence of a parent (Gertler et al., 2004, p. 219). While educational outcomes in these countries cannot be equated with educational outcomes in Canada, it does suggest that schooling is negatively affected following the death of a parent.

Adult children

Adult children are also faced with the death of parents, and significant gender differences exist for both the surviving children and the deceased parent. Losing a parent is a stressful event that has adverse effects on adult children both physically and psychologically, and some of these individuals are more adversely affected than others (Umberson & Chen, 1994, p. 164). Gender of both the parent and the child seems to play a significant role in the affects following death, most importantly how individuals cope with the loss. Significant gender differences in surviving adult children exist in relation to the deceased parent as daughters are more negatively affected by the loss of a mother and sons are more affected by the loss of a father (Marks, Jun, & Song, 2007, p. 1628). Overall, men who lose their father are more likely to show depressive symptoms and a

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greater decrease in psychological well-being than are daughters who lose their father (Marks et al., 2007). Adult children who lose their parents show a great gender difference in the outcomes following the death of a parent.

Losing a parent as an adult has many different outcomes than for young children who lose a parent, including the increased use of alcohol. When gender differences of surviving children are not taken into account, increased alcohol consumption following the death of a parent is highly related to the death of a father (Umberson & Chen, 1994, p. 158). When women lose their mother they face an increased risk of binge drinking, and when men lose both their parents they also face an increased risk of binge drinking (Marks et al., 2007). Alcohol consumption following the death of a parent is also linked to the age of the child, as older children are more likely to drink after the loss of their father than are younger adult children. (Umberson & Chen, 1994, p. 163). Both men and women, following the death of a parent are at a higher risk for increased alcohol consumption, but certain circumstances can predict the increase of these risks.

Adult children are much more likely to face the death of both parents than are younger children, and the loss of both parents can have severe effects for both men and women. For women who have lost both of their parents they show an increase in depressive symptoms, a decrease in happiness, lowered self-esteem, and a decrease in psychological wellness (Marks et al., 2007). For men who lose both parents their risk of binge drinking increases, and their self-esteem and psychological wellness both decrease (Marks et al., 2007). Both self-esteem and psychological wellness are significantly affected for both men and women after the death of both parents, and while increased binge drinking is associated with men after the loss of both parents, for women, an increased risk for binge drinking is mostly associated with the death of their

mother. While depressive symptoms tend to increase for women after the death of both parents, men's depressive symptoms tend to increase after the death of their father (Marks et al., 2007). Both men and women can experience a number of the same outcomes, such as binge drinking and depressive symptoms, but the situations that bring about these outcomes may differ.

After the death of one or both parents, adult sibling relationships may change as they may become closer or more distant. Siblings who are close prior to the death of one or both parents, tend to grow even closer after the death. In the case of losing both parents, some siblings become closer as they realize they are what is left of the family (Greif & Woolley, 2015, p. 80). Siblings that are not especially close or distant before the death are often brought together through the changing roles and responsibilities within the family. This changing of family dynamic generally increases the closeness of siblings as they figure out how the family will now operate (Greif & Woolley, 2015, p. 81). Sibling relationships that have been strained or distant for a long period of time do not tend to improve after the death of one or both parents. Sibling relationships can even drift apart, especially if it was the parents that had kept the siblings together. Following the death, siblings who were distant before may become close temporarily, but eventually the relationship may fall back to the way it was before the death (Greif & Woolley, 2015).

Death of a Sibling

The death of a sibling is a significant life event that has great impacts on different aspects of life, including education and relationships. Some common emotions found among individuals who have lost a sibling include shock, confusion, fear, and loneliness (Balk, 1983, p. 152). Some common outcomes include the changing of relationships with peers as well as changes in study habits and grades. After the death of a sibling, grades, study habits, and relationships with peers all generally get worse, however, over time, they seem to level off and get back to normal (Balk,

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1983, p. 152). Fletcher, Mailick, Song, and Wolfe (2013) found significant gender differences in relation to sibling death and education. Overall, surviving sisters are more at-risk for dropping out of school and not attending post-secondary than surviving brothers (p. 817). Both surviving brothers and sisters are found to have lower test scores after the loss of a sibling, suggesting that losing a sibling has significant impacts on educational outcomes (Fletcher et al., 2013, p. 813). While there are negative outcomes associated with sibling death for the surviving sibling, it is important to recognize that some of these outcomes may only be temporary.

There is a significant gender difference that is associated with the loss of a sibling, emphasizing the unequal roles and responsibilities in the family structure. It reflects the idea that responsibility after death is often unequal, with sisters being more likely to take on additional responsibilities after the death, helping the parents function and cope with the loss (Fletcher et al., 2013). In general, sisters are more heavily impacted by sibling death than are brothers suggesting that sisters normally form stronger bonds with siblings than brothers do. The impact the death has on a sibling is also impacted by cause of death, and this area also shows gender difference. Surviving brothers tend to be most significantly impacted when the cause of death is accident or suicide. For surviving sisters the cause of death that seems to be the most significant is sudden illness (Fletcher et al., 2013). There are significant gender differences when it comes to the loss of a sibling, as sisters are generally more affected than brothers, but the cause of death is also important for the outcomes of both genders.

Death of a Child

The loss of a child may be the most severe loss, as parents who have lost a child not only mourn the child, but also mourn the loss of a part of them (Rando, 1985, p. 19). A common feeling among parents who have lost a child is survivor guilt, as it is seen that children are

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supposed to outlive their parents, not the other way around. Most parents feel as though they have failed as parents and question their power and abilities. The role of being a provider, protector, and mentor to that child diminishes after the death of the child, creating a confusion of identity, which may prove to be even stronger in parent's who only had that one child (Rando, 1985, p. 20). When parents lose a child, they also tend to lose social supports that were previously available to them. This loss of support often comes from the loss of interaction with other parents, as these parents may avoid interaction. This may be because they are unsure of what to say to the parents who have lost a child and not wanting to believe that this situation could ever happen to them (Rando, 1985, p. 20). Losing a child is like losing a part of oneself, and the potential loss of social support makes it even more difficult for parents to grieve the loss of a child.

Mothers who face the death of a child face one of the most traumatic life events. Many mothers who lose a child report that it was a traumatic event and that the pain from the death is unbearable (Tan & Ketola, 2013). This event is so significant that mothers feel that their life has changed forever, and will never be the same again. Feelings of numbness are also common following the death of a child, as well as suicidal thoughts. Although some thoughts of suicide are common, many mothers who have other children know that they need to be there to support them (Tan & Ketola, 2013). Another common theme among mothers who lose a child is guilt and self-blame. Many mothers blame themselves for the death of the child, not being able to prevent the death, or for not seeing the death coming (Tan & Ketola, 2013). Overall, it is hard for mothers to accept that the child has died and many mothers have a hard time finding closure. Mothers often keep a connection with the deceased child, making it even tougher to find closure

(Tan & Ketola, 2013). The death of a child is an extremely traumatic event for a mother, making it hard for mothers to accept the death and find closure.

When looking at parents' who have lost a child, their quality of life after the death can be measured. Song, Floyd, Seltzer, Greenberg, and Hong (2010) specifically measured the health-related quality of life in parents who have lost a child. Overall, parents who have lost a child have significantly lower health-related quality of life when compared to parents who have not lost a child. While losing a child in general, lowered health-related quality of life, certain types of child death show more severe impacts. Parents who have lost a child in a violent death have the lowest health-related quality of life (Song et al., 2010, p. 227). Another aspect that predicts health-related quality of life following the death of a child is marital closeness. In general, those with higher marital closeness experience higher health-related quality of life than do couples that report less marital closeness, after the death of a child (Song et al., 2010, p. 276). After the death of a child, health-related quality of life is severely impacted, although there are some factors that are likely to make this higher or lower.

As we have seen, the way a child dies has significant impacts on how the parents cope with the loss. The cause of death of a child plays a role in the emotional well-being of the surviving parents. Parents who have lost a child suddenly are more likely to experience depression than when the child dies of a long-term illness (Videka-Sherman, 1987, p. 106). This may be the case because parents who experience the sudden death of a child do not have time to prepare for the death. For those families who lose a child to long-term illness, while they may have time to prepare for the death, they have to deal with the prolonged emotional, physical, and financial stress that comes along with long-term illness (Videka-Sherman, 1987, p. 106). The age of the child at the time of death also seems to be a strong and important predictor for the

emotional outcomes of the surviving parents. Those who lose infants show less distress in the few years following the death than do parents who have lost a child older than one year (Videka-Sherman, 1987, p. 107). When mothers are compared to fathers after the death of a child, overall, mothers tend to report higher levels of distress than do fathers (Videka-Sherman, 1987, p. 107). Cause of death, age of child at time of death, and gender differences all play an important role in how parents react to the death of child.

The loss of a child also has mass implications for couples and their relationship. Individuals show grief very differently, leaving room for misinterpretation of actions. While one partner may feel depressed following the death of a child, the other partner may see this as them withdrawing from the relationship and take it as a personal attack toward them (Rando, 1985, p. 21). Men are socialized in our society to not show emotion, which has many implications for men who face the loss of a child. If the father, following the death, does not show his emotion and does not grieve properly, this could lead to problems in resolving the grief (Rando, 1985, p. 21). Things such as lack of intimacy and problems communicating properly after the death of a child can lead to relationship problems, and ultimately to the high divorce rate in bereaved couples (Rando, 1985, p. 21). The death of a child can lead to severe relationship problems in couples and even to divorce, many of this associated with different grieving styles.

Impact on the Youngest Members

While it is easier to understand the impacts of death on adults and older children than younger children and toddlers, it is still important to understand how the youngest members of family's understand, process, and cope with the death of a loved one. Younger children, under three years, also experience death and affected by it despite their age. Children understand, process, and cope with death differently depending on their age and developmental stage, as well

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as their individual experiences and personality (Norris-Shortle, Young, & Williams, 1993). The relationship between the young child and the deceased plays a significant role in how they understand the death. If the deceased person was someone the child saw on a regular basis, like a parent or a sibling, and was someone they had a close and positive relationship with, they more readily realize the absence of that person (Norris-Shortle et al., 1993). Another factor that contributes to how the child experiences death and grief is how the people around them react. If distress is present, the toddler can often pick this up and is able to sense that something is wrong. If the death is not explained properly to the child, the child may begin to feel fearful and confused since they cannot fully grasp the events that have occurred. If fear and confusion are present in the child they may begin to behaviorally act out or withdraw emotionally (Norris-Shortle et al., 1993, p. 738). Even the youngest members of the family are aware when a death occurs and are therefore impacted by the death.

Conclusion

When a death in the family occurs, all members of that family are greatly affected. When a child in the family passes away both the parents and the surviving siblings must cope with the loss. When a sibling is lost, education and relationships are negatively affected, although this is temporary. Sisters in general are more affected by the death of a sibling than are brothers, and this may be due to the way boys and men are socialized and how the family is structured. Siblings often take on a large burden as they feel they need to take on the roles and responsibilities of the deceased sibling. While siblings are greatly affected by the loss a sibling, the parents are faced with the potentially most traumatic event of their life.

After the passing of a child, parents often feel they have lost a part of themselves, and describe the experience as traumatic. It can be hard for parents to accept the death of a child, and

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therefore it is extremely hard for them to find closure. The overall health and quality of life of parents decreases following the death of a child. Couples who face the loss of a child together may experience relationship problems after the death, with differential grieving processes at the root of this. Losing a child has great impacts on relationships and health and may be the hardest kind of death one could go through.

When one or both parents are lost, the age of the child has to be taken into account. While all children grieve the loss, younger children will have much different outcomes than adult children. Younger children often show resilience especially if they are given proper support. Adult children may have more severe outcomes such as the increase of alcohol use, and their relationships with other siblings may be positively or negatively affected. Both younger and older children are affected by the death of a parent, but the way these different age groups cope differs.

The loss of a spouse is associated with poorer health overall and an increased risk of suicide. For couples that have children together, the surviving spouse is forced to change how they parent and restructure the family. Depending on circumstances, the presence of children may have an effect on suicide. Having the right support available, including the support from family, friends, and the community, is important in coping with the death of a spouse.

The loss of any family member leads to a significant and inevitable reorganization of the family structure. The ways family's go about this reorganization differs, leading some families to be able to function and cope more effectively than other families after the death of a loved one. In all of these different categories and circumstances it is clear that gender and age differences do exist in how individuals cope with the death of a loved one. These are important to consider because they can help predict how one might cope following the loved one, and this knowledge

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can help develop effective coping strategies that will produce the healthiest outcome for different individuals and the family as a whole.

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