

Managing Crisis: A Death in the Chapter

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None of us is ever fully prepared for the death of someone close to us - family member, friend, or Frater in the Bond. Even in cases where the person has been battling a terminal disease, the occurrence of death is no less painful and shocking. When a death affects us at our chapter, however, the acute grief reaction can be severe and debilitating to all members of the chapter.

Most people in the age group of our Fraters have never had to deal with the death of someone close to them. They are likely unfamiliar with the emotional dynamics they will be experiencing, which can bring on its own set of fears. They will for the first time feel their own mortality and realize the actual frailty of life. These feelings, then, compound the profound sense of loss (or "grief"). The result is confusion and fear, combined with the pain of losing a friend and Frater.

When a person works through the emotional processes associated with a death (collectively called "bereavement"), the goal is a healthy return to normalcy, or recovery. Recovering from a death in the chapter becomes a group exercise, for the chapter grieves as a whole. This is a very healthy situation. As an old adage puts it, "Joy shared is joy increased; grief shared is a grief diminished." This is the primary reason why families gather together when they experience a death; the chapter, too, will find it necessary to "come together" in response to the death of a Frater. In times of stress such as these, chapter leaders must truly help lead the Fraters through to recovery, and true leadership is crucial.

A death in your chapter can occur in varying circumstances - on or off chapter premises, natural, suicide, homicide, etc. This article will give you practical advice in dealing with all these situations. There are also public relations or adverse publicity ramifications associated with a death within the Fraternity. Keep this information on file for the future, and make its contents a regular part of your officer and leadership training.

Death on the Chapter Premises ~

If you have a death of a member in the chapter house, you must act quickly to notify the proper authorities. If you think a Frater (or other person) is dead, you often cannot really be sure. Many medical conditions such as coma or severe shock can simulate death when in actuality the victim is still alive. First, dial 9-1-1 (if your community is equipped with 911 emergency telephone service) or the local fire department/EMS, and then administer CPR and other first-aid techniques that may be appropriate and for which you have been trained. The reasons for this are very important.

If the person was truly dead, the fire department/EMS will transport the body to the nearest hospital to be pronounced dead. They then will contact the police department and/or the county coroner to report the death. (This is standard procedure.) The legal place of death will then be listed as the hospital, and not the chapter address, thereby eliminating much adverse publicity.

Suicide ~

Death by homicide, and especially suicide, are the most emotionally-complex, and compound even further the pain associated with losing a friend and Frater. Unfortunately, these can also be high-profile cases, which may adversely affect your chapter and the Fraternity. The media will almost always cover suicide deaths, as they do homicides. Once the press learns that a death has occurred in a fraternity house, they will have a field day playing up that fact, even though the fraternity may have been completely uninvolved. To handle these situations, again call the local fire department/EMS or dial 9-1-1.

The 9-1-1 dispatcher or EMS personnel at the scene will call the county coroner, who has jurisdiction over all deaths in the county. The coroner's investigator and representatives of the police department (or sheriff's office) will almost always come to the site of the death to rule out foul play and to generally investigate the facts of the death.

As a chapter leader, you must be skillful in controlling the flow of information. The first call you make is to the emergency services of your town or campus. They will do the bulk of the necessary communications from there. However, there are others you need to contact. In this order, contact the following people as quickly as possible;

1. Your Chapter Advisor and Board Chairman. Have them come and assist as soon as they can.
2. Your campus fraternity/sorority administrator.
3. The Offices of the Grand Chapter.

You are NEVER to call the deceased's parents, family, or friends. The authorities, who are professionally trained in this area, will handle this. Try to uninvolve yourselves as much as possible.

Assemble the chapter right away by calling an emergency chapter meeting. Tell the chapter what has happened, and keep them all together, in the house. Limit access to your house by allowing only authorized people in. Control communication leaving the house by emphasizing to the chapter the need to keep this a very private issue, at least until all the facts are discovered.

Handling the Media ~

As I stated earlier, many homicide and suicide deaths attract attention by the various news media. Be prepared for this knowing how to handle the media.

1. ONE person speaks for the chapter and should be assisted by the Chapter Advisor and Board Chairman.
2. Be sure to clear it with the police and/or county coroner before any statements are made. They may not want you talking to ANYONE before they complete their investigation.
3. Never use, "No comment." This is interpreted as an admission of wrongdoing or guilt. Be brief and factual. Prepare your statements, in writing, in advance. Do not deviate from this. Remember, with a reporter, NOTHING is "off the record."

Off-Premises Death ~

If a death occurs in the chapter (such as an accident or natural causes), but not on Fraternity premises, follow the same rules as outlined earlier. Again, if you are present at the scene of the death, all the above applies.

Another off-premises death situation is one in which the chapter learns of the death after the fact. When this is the case, the Prytanis (or other skilled chapter leader) should call an emergency meeting of the chapter to disseminate this information to the entire chapter, so everyone has all the facts up front. You will encounter what is known as an "acute grief reaction"; a sense of disbelief, anger, fear, and sadness as manifested by a sick feeling in the lower abdomen, numbness, and emotional shock. This is a time for the Fraters to support one another. As a chapter leader, be sure to keep the chapter together physically, and discourage anyone from alcohol consumption.

This is a good time to assemble the chapter for the Ritual Meeting on the Occasion of a Death of a Frater, found in the Silver Book. This is our own private way of expressing our sorrow as Fraters in the Bond, and helps us to memorialize a Frater as only Tekes can.

After the Crisis ~

A few days after the death occurs, and the initial acute grief reaction has subsided, the chapter should engage in those activities which promote normal, natural bereavement, which leads to recovery. One of the best things to do is attend and participate in the funeral service. If this is not possible (due to geographical considerations), then the chapter can plan a memorial service at the college's or university's chapel. (If there is no chapel per se, a memorial service in a room in the student union or chapter house is always appropriated.) Invite the deceased Frater's family as well -- it will be most appreciated by them, and endear them to the Fraternity.

Another way to appropriately memorialize a Frater is to make a charitable contribution in his name to his family's favorite charity or to the TKE Educational Foundation. Encourage your Board to create a scholarship in his name to keep his memory alive.

Where to Get Help ~

Many forms of professional guidance assistance are likely available to your chapter from various sources. Perhaps you will find it helpful to have a speaker come to a chapter meeting to talk about grief and the bereavement process, or a psychologist who specializes in grief recover. Your campus fraternity/sorority administrator will gladly assist you in finding these professionals. Or place a call to your college's psychology department or college of social/behavioral sciences; they probably have several qualified professors who would be glad to help. Another good source for this kind of assistance is through the campus chaplain (if your school has one), or by calling your minister, priest, or rabbi. The local churches and synagogues often have programs to address these issues; they are usually grateful to be able to put them into actions. Also, don't hesitate to call your local funeral home. Funeral directors often have rosters of grief recovery professionals who can help you. And, finally, the Offices of the Grand Chapter is always ready to assist you by sending skilled staff members and Fraternity volunteers to facilitate your recovery.

I sincerely hope that you will never have to use any of this information firsthand. However, many of you will; death does not discriminate based on age, gender, or any demographic category. In an organization the size of Tau Kappa Epsilon, statistics tell us that we will deal with chapter deaths several times a year. So, always do everything in your power to safeguard the health, safety, and welfare of each and every Frater -- the purest form of brotherhood.