

Changes in Behavior As the Result of the Death of a Relative

by

Abigail B. Calkin

I received a letter from a friend who asked forgiveness "for being strangely dumb", i.e., according to Webster (1976) and Oxford (1962), destitute of the power of speech, unable to speak from astonishment or shock. This friend was experiencing two losses, and it was a short note after a long silence. His letter reminded me of three charts I have and I began to think of the difference between clinical, poetic, and behavioral statements about reactions to death.

Bowlby (1980) stated that losing a person one loves is the most intensely painful experience to have. The purpose of mourning that loss is to reduce its emotional impact--to accept simultaneously the value of the person lost and the death. He described the common elements everyone experiences: loss of appetite, insomnia, neglect of family, home, and career.

As a result of her research, Kubler-Ross (1969) listed five stages we experience in our reactions to dying and death: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Denial occurs when one refuses to believe that the loss has occurred; often there is a numbness so that the loss cannot be fully absorbed or comprehended. Anger is that frustrating--and often misdirected--animosity for experiencing the loss. In the bargaining stage one attempts to negotiate simultaneously the acceptance and the reversal of the loss. Depression is the deep sadness one experiences as the pain of the loss soaks in. Arriving at acceptance means the person has absorbed the reality of the loss and moved on to full, healthy functioning.

I looked specifically at depression and found it does not produce an increase in behavior; in fact, it is a "lowering in quality, vigor, value, or amount; (a) reduction in activity" (Oxford, Illustrated Dictionary, 1962). Wolpe (1982) summarized Beck as stating that depression is characterized by "motor and verbal retardation, crying, sadness, loss of mirth response, loss of interest, self-devaluation, sleeplessness, and anorexia." Coppen (1970) says that depression will often be manifest-

ed by "a lack of feeling (since everything is becoming more and more meaningless)...diminished interest and drive...or apathy toward hobbies and social life, so that he has to spend more time and effort just getting through daily life."

Poetry is riddled with cryptic references to death and loss. Anna Akhmatova disparaged the personal and national losses in Russia, of both the revolution and World War I. In a sentence from her Requiem she wrote: "And eyes I love are closing on the final horror." (Akhmatova, 1957/1985). Perhaps one of the more famous lines has been Dylan Thomas's (1952), "Do not go gentle into that good night," in which he admonished his father to maintain his integrity in the face of death. A most powerful first line is his "A grief ago,".

While there has been considerable research in the last ten years on death and extensive poetry for thousands of years on the topic, we don't often have an opportunity to look behaviorally at an individual's reaction. The information on Charts 1, 2, and 3 was gathered by chance. Betty and C.J. were taking classes when a relative's death occurred. Abigail had some data from earlier years that she retrieved.

Betty was counting the chewing of hangnails all day (see Chart 1). C. J. was doing one minute timings on see-say computer fact flash cards (see Chart 2). Each recorded her data on Daily Standard Celeration Charts. Abigail had been keeping a journal for approximately 20 years when she gleaned the information by counting the number of lines per page and the number of pages per year (see Chart 3). Her data are recorded on a Yearly Standard Celeration Chart.

While Betty's and Abigail's losses were immediate and unannounced, C. J. knew her loss was coming. As Chart 2 shows, however, advance knowledge did not lessen the deceleration of subsequent behavior.

CALENDAR WEEKS

8 CYCLE - 140 DAYS (20 WKS)
 BEHAVIOR RESEARCH CO
 BOX 327 - KANSAS CITY, KANS 66103

17 MAR 74
 DAY MO YR

14 APR 74
 DAY MO YR

12 MAY 74
 DAY MO YR

9 JUN 74
 DAY MO YR

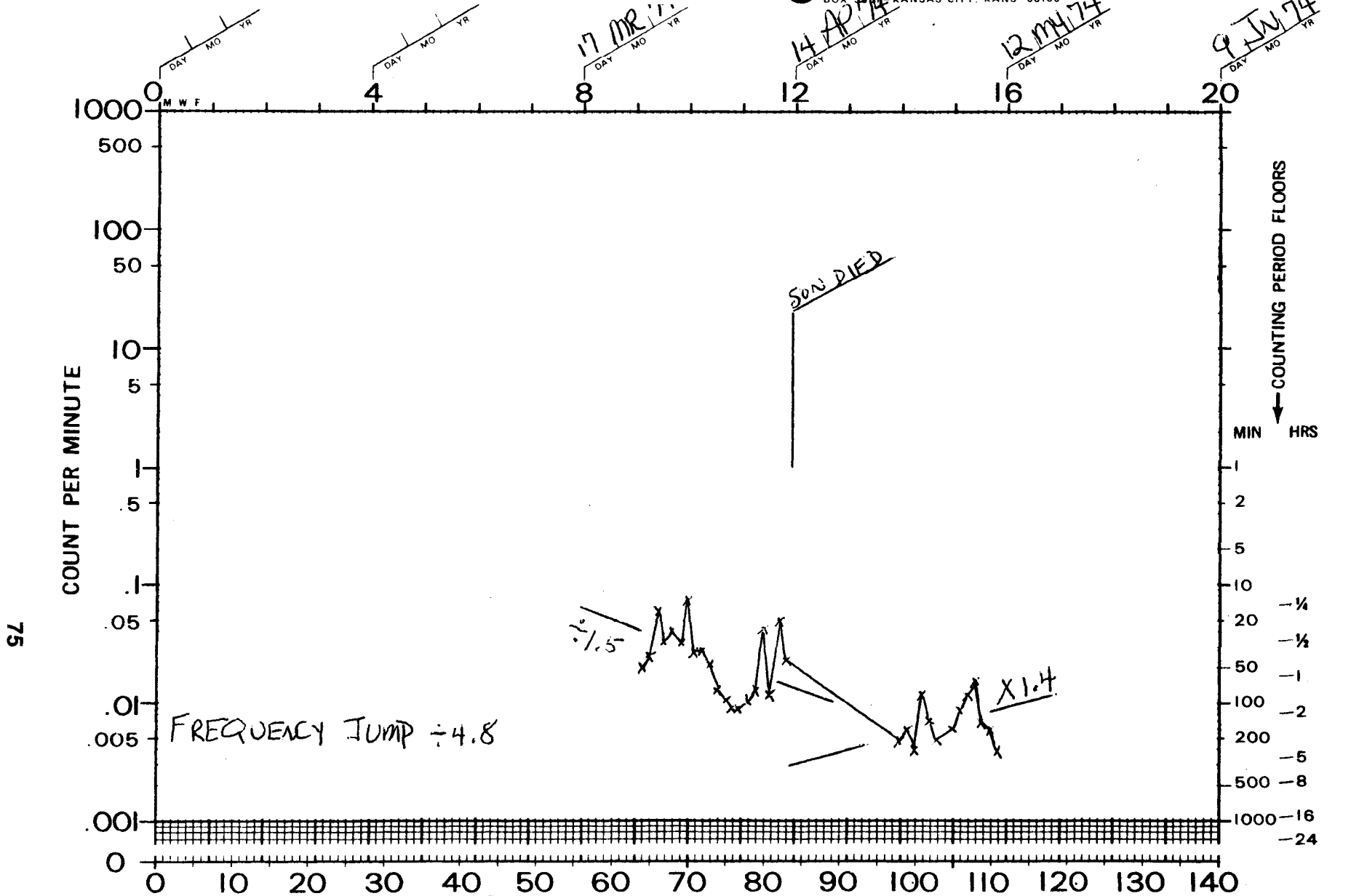


CHART 1.
 SUCCESSIVE CALENDAR DAYS

A.B. CALKIN SUPERVISOR
 A.B. CALKIN ADVISER
 BETTY MANAGER

BETTY BEHAVIOR
 40+ AGE
 CHEWING MAGNALS LABEL COUNTED

WESTERN OREGON COLLEGE AGENCY
 BETTY TIMER
 BETTY COUNTER
 BETTY CHARTER

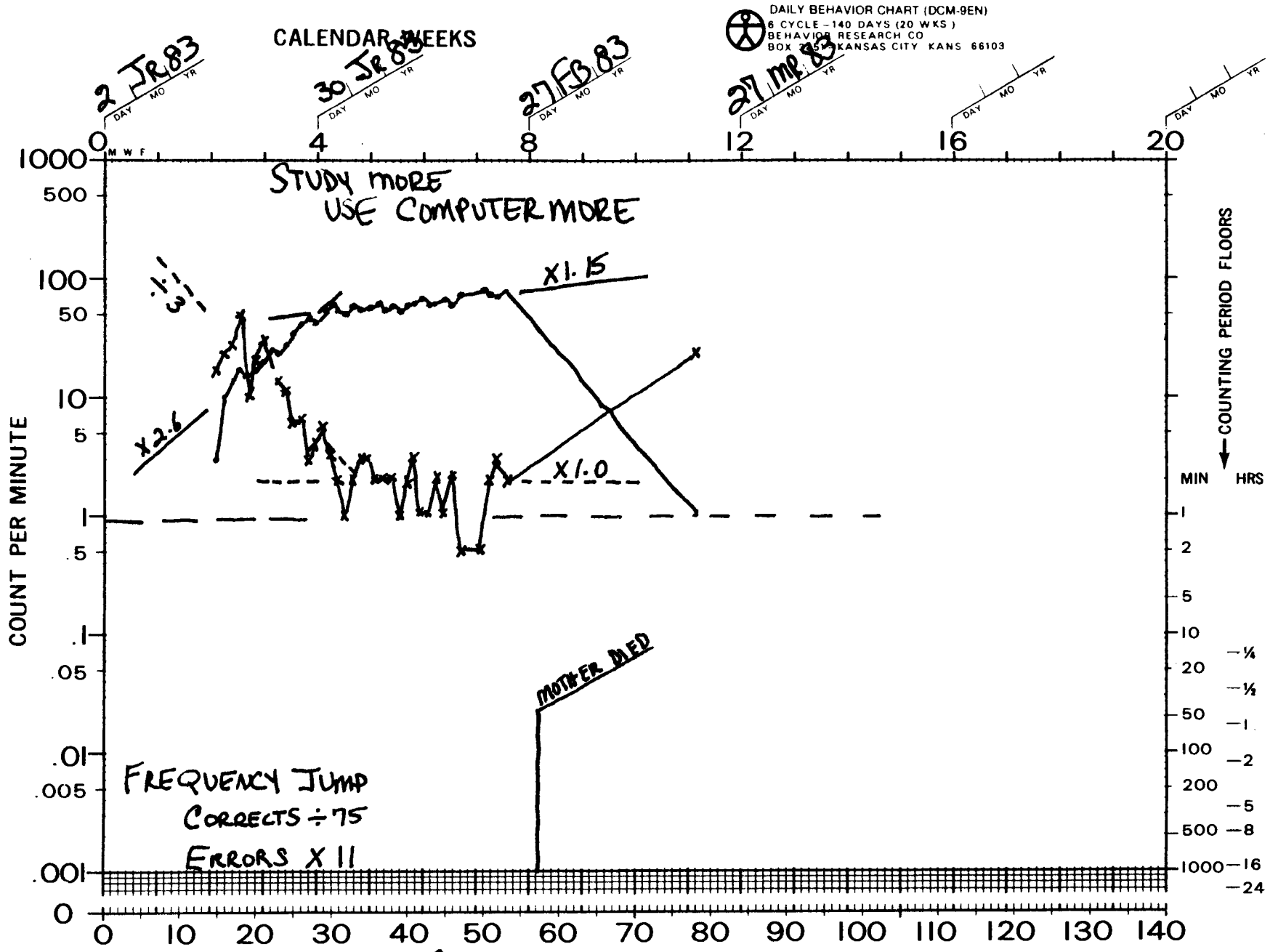
DEPOSITOR

AGENCY

TIMER

COUNTER

CHARTER



76

CHART 2
 SUCCESSIVE CALENDAR DAYS

OR. LINDSEY SUPERVISOR C.J. ADVISER C.J. BEHAVIOR 27 AGE SEE-SAY COUNTED COMPUTER LABEL

CALENDAR DECADES



YEARLY BEHAVIOR CHART (YCM-1EN)
 6 CYCLE - 100 YEARS (10 DECADES)
 BEHAVIOR RESEARCH CO.
 BOX 3351 - KANSAS CITY, KANS. 66103

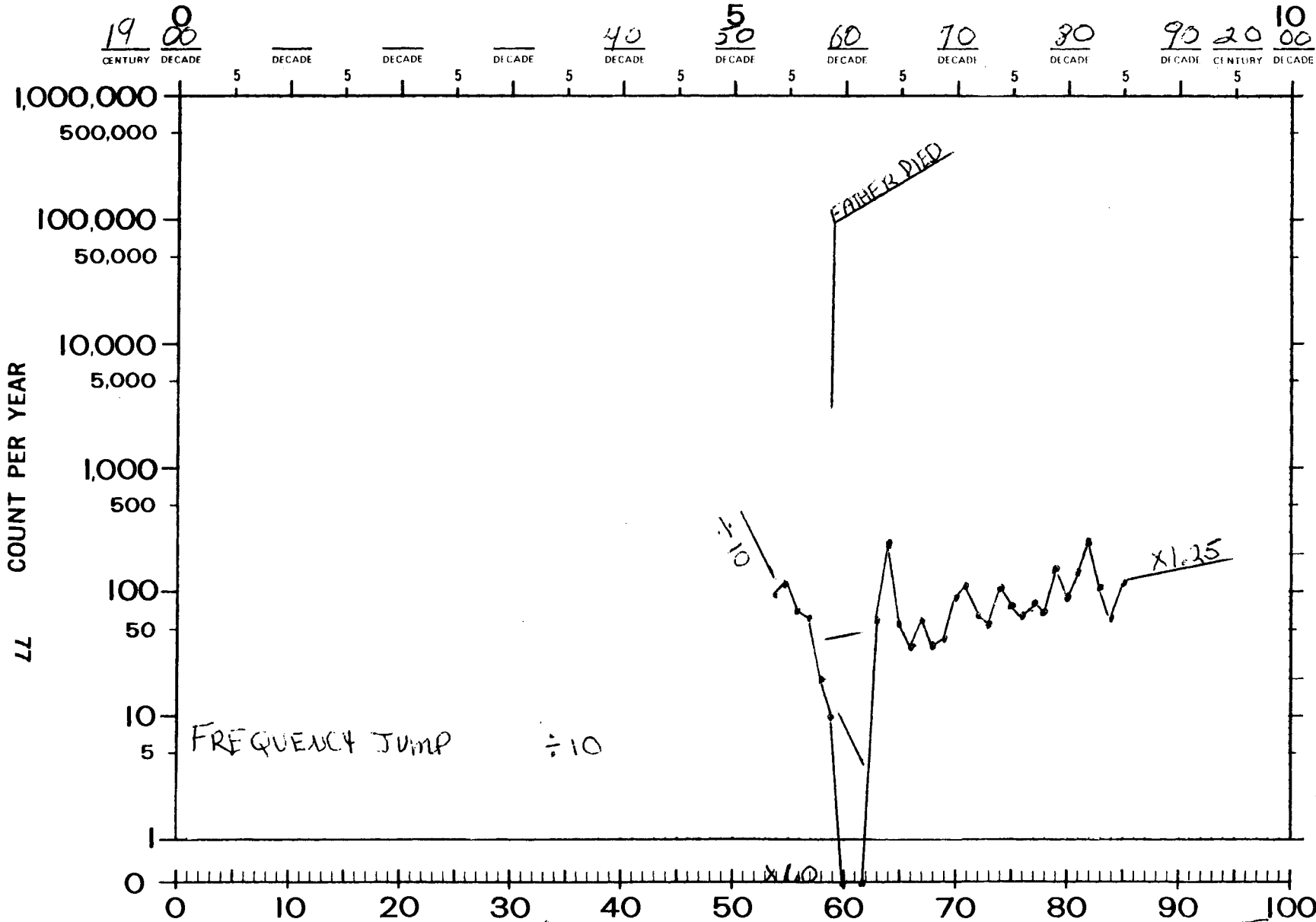


CHART 3.
 SUCCESSIVE CALENDAR YEARS

A.B. CALKIN

SUPERVISOR ADVISER MANAGER

DEPOSITOR

AGENCY

TIMER

ABIGAIL
 COUNTER

ABIGAIL
 BEHAVIOR

ABIGAIL
 CHARTER

12-44
 AGE

JOURNAL PAGES
 WRITTEN
 LABEL COUNTED

31-35 LINES/PAGE

In analyzing the data I looked at pauses in recording, frequency changes, and celerations. The frequency jump-downs and the pauses give the greatest information. Each of the three charts shows a lowering of activity where, immediately following the death, the counting or the behavior no longer occurred. Betty's chart shows she stopped recording for two weeks. According to her verbal report to me at the time, however, the behavior did not stop. As shown in C. J.'s chart, the behavior stopped occurring for three weeks. Both were forced to continue counting since each was enrolled in a university class for which she wished to obtain credit. In Abigail's case, the behavior ceased to occur for a total of four years, all of the three years shown and portions of 1959 and 1963.

When the counting or behavior resumed, the frequency changes were large and varied. Betty's chart shows a frequency jump-down of +4.8; Abigail's of +10, and C. J.'s of +75 on correct responses and frequency jump-up of X11 on errors (which included skips). Changes in overall celerations were also evident. In Betty's and Abigail's cases, the celerations changed from +1.5 to x1.4, and from +10 to x1.2, respectively. C. J.'s charting stopped after one day--too soon to determine celeration.

The changes in Charts 1, 2, and 3 offer a behavioral definition of the shock and depression of three normal people reacting to the death of a relative. The immediate absence of recording or of behavior may express the numbness. The frequency jump-downs on each chart are a measure and definition of depression. (C. J.'s increase in errors included skips and shows a decrease in total flash cards turned). It seems not relevant whether the behavior was an acceleration or decelerating. Depression is, at minimum, a temporary cessation or slowing of behavior, a lowering of value or amount, a reduction in a particular, observed activity, a state of reduced vitality.

Charts 1, 2, and 3, however, say nothing about the myriad of other behaviors these people emitted before and after, the death. We do not know whether some behaviors are lost entirely. Do any behaviors increase, and if so, which ones? Crying, or other expressions of sadness, could increase as did Betty's hangnail biting and Abigail's journal writing. Do we develop certain avoidance behaviors that verge on superstitious behaviors?

How frequently do people engineer a second loss in an effort to deal with the first loss? C. J. and Abigail discussed this. C. J. stated she was pursuing two on-going professional activities at what she estimated was a steep celeration. After the death she reported that she pursued each of them "harder and faster." She dropped each at the first signs of painful stimuli. Abigail's engineered second losses are reflected in a drop in journal pages written from 1965 to 1969. Journal pages written during these years had a median of 41 per year, while it was 86 during the remaining years. C. J.'s and Abigail's behavior in these two situations suggest the possibility some people engineer a second loss to help them deal with the first. Further investigation in this area is needed.

It will be difficult to answer these and other questions for their answers depend on our sensitivity to, and counting of behavior and environmental changes at a time when death, divorce, or other major loss vents occur. The charts shown and discussed provide a glimpse into a behavioral definition and analysis of reactions to death.

References

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