

## How to Help Grieving People

Relatives, friends and neighbors are supportive at the time of a death, during the wake and the funeral. Food, flowers and everyone's presence, are among the many thoughtful expressions of support. After the funeral though, many grieving people wonder what happened to everyone. They require support and caring even more when their new reality begins to hit them and the long process of grief begins. Family members often have their hands full of grief and often find it difficult to support one another, or may not live nearby.

Your help and understanding can make a significant difference in the healing of your friend's grief. A grieving person needs people who are willing to: listen; sit with them; cry with them; reminisce; care; have creative ideas for coping; be honest; help them feel loved and needed; help them believe that they will make it through their grief.

The ways of helping grieving people are many...

- All that is necessary is a squeeze of the hand, a kiss, a hug, your presence. If you wish to say something, say 'I'm sorry' or 'I care'.
- Offer to help with practical things, i.e., running errands, preparing food, caring for children. Say 'I'm going to the store; would you like some bread and milk? I will pick them up for you.'
- It is not helpful to say 'Call me if there is anything I can do'.
- Don't be afraid to cry openly if you too were close to the deceased. Often the bereaved find themselves comforting you, but at the same time they understand your tears, and they don't feel as alone in their grief.
- It is not always necessary to ask questions about how the death happened. Let the bereaved tell you as much as they want to when they are ready. A helpful question might be, 'Would you like to talk? I'll listen'.
- Do not say 'I know just how you feel'.
- The bereaved may often ask "WHY?" It is often a cry of pain rather than a question. It is not necessary to try and provide an answer, but if you do, you may reply, "I don't know why."
- Don't use platitudes like "Life is for the living" or "It is God's will". Explanations rarely console. It is better to say nothing.
- Recognize that the bereaved may be angry. They may be angry at their God, the person who died, the clergy, rescue teams, other family members, medical staff, etc. Encourage them to acknowledge their anger and to find healthy ways to address it.

- Be available to LISTEN frequently. Most bereaved wish to talk about the person who has died. Encourage them to talk about the deceased. Do not change the conversation.
- Be patient. Don't say 'you will get over it in time'. Mourning may take a long time. The bereaved need you to stand by them for as long as necessary. Encourage them to be patient with themselves as there is no timetable for grief.
- Accept whatever feelings are being expressed by the mourner. Do not say 'you shouldn't feel like that'. This attitude puts pressure on the bereaved to push down their feelings.
- Be aware that a bereaved person's self-esteem may be very low.
- Depression is often part of grief. To be able to talk things over with an understanding friend or loved one, is one factor that may prevent a person from becoming severely depressed.
- Give special attention to young children in the family. DO NOT tell them not to cry, or not to upset the adults.
- Suggest the bereaved person keep a journal.
- The bereaved may appear to be getting worse. Be aware this is often due to the reality of the death hitting them.
- Be aware of physical reactions to the death, (lack of appetite, sleeplessness, headaches, inability to concentrate). These can be 'normal', and can also affect the person's coping ability, energy and recovery.
- Be aware of the use of drugs and alcohol. Medication should only be taken under the supervision of a physician. Often these only delay the grief response.
- Suggest that the bereaved postpone major decisions such as moving, giving away belongings, etc. Later they may regret their hasty decisions. It is best for the bereaved to keep decision making to a minimum.
- Don't avoid the bereaved. This adds to their loss. As the widowed often say, 'I not only lost my spouse, but my friends as well.'
- Be aware that weekends, holidays and evenings may be especially difficult.
- Consider sending a note at the time of their loved one's birthday, anniversary, or other special days.
- Practice continuing acts of thoughtfulness ~ a note, visit, plant, helpful book on grief, plate of cookies, phone call, or an invitation for lunch, dinner or coffee. Take the initiative in calling the bereaved.