

When Someone you Care about is Bereaved

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Grieving is a natural and normal response to loss. While everyone grieves in their own way, it is important to remember that feeling irritable, confused, relieved, bitter, angry or guilty are just as much a part of grieving as the more commonly described feelings of sadness and loneliness.

Following a death, bereaved people often have difficulty taking care of day-to-day business; their energy levels are low, sleeping and eating patterns may be disrupted and their concentration and memory may be poor. They may have days when they feel they are doing quite well and try to “*get on with things*”. They may also have days when they feel overwhelmed by their loss, days when they can do no more than cry and wonder how they can go on living without the person they loved. All this is exhausting work. It is hard for the person who has been bereaved, but it is also hard on the people who are trying to support them.

Sometimes in our desire to help and reduce their suffering, we hurry people along. We try to cheer them up, take them out of themselves and encourage them to move on in their lives. But grieving takes time and it is often very painful. We worry that we may be intruding, or that we are not qualified, and may do or say the wrong thing. The needs of a bereaved person are usually quite simple; they may need some emotional support from you; a listening ear, a shared cup of tea. Equally they may need some practical help; someone to answer the phone or pick the children up from school. You do not need any particular skills or training to be helpful. *More important than who you are is how you are in the company of the grieving person.* The best help that you can offer is your company and support and a willingness to accept them as they are.

When a death occurs:

- **Do** make every effort to attend the removal or funeral.
- **Do** make contact either by note or by phone. People generally appreciate a personal note that expresses your condolences. It can also be appropriate to mention any fond memories you have of the person who died.
- **Do** express your sympathy in a simple way. There are no words that will take away the pain. Phrases such as; “*I’m so sorry*” or “*you are in my thoughts*”, are fine. A hand on the shoulder or a squeeze of the hand can also express support.
- A brief visit with an offer of practical help may be appreciated. Tasks such as cooking can be difficult, so a gift of simple, nutritious food that can be frozen until needed may be appreciated.

- **Don’t** avoid the person out of embarrassment or a fear of upsetting them. They may believe you don’t care.
- **Don’t** tell them you know how they feel; you don’t.
- **Don’t** resort to clichés such as; “*It was for the best*”, “*life goes on*”, “*he had a good life*”, etc
- **Don’t** recount stories of your own or other people’s losses.

Most people experience a sense of shock when they are first bereaved. It is difficult to absorb what has happened. Grief may begin with thoughts such as: “*I can’t believe she’s dead*”; “*It all feels like a bad dream.*” This numbing sense of shock and disbelief can last days, weeks or months and the bereaved person may appear to be coping well as life goes on. But for many bereaved people it is in the months after the death that the full force of what has happened begins to hit them and every day tasks from working and parenting to shopping and paying bills become very difficult. This seems to coincide with a time when people who were so supportive at the time of the death stop calling. While friends and neighbours resume their normal lives, the bereaved face into months and years of reminders of their loss and adjustments that need to be made.

As time goes by

- **Don’t** assume they are “*over it*”, or have enough help.
- **Don’t** avoid mentioning the person who has died. Most bereaved people welcome opportunities to talk. Grief is not lessened by avoiding the subject
- **Don’t** offer advice on how they should feel, act or get on with their lives
- **Don’t** make vague offers of help ; for example: (“*Call me if you need anything.*”). Many bereaved people have difficulty reaching out and asking for that help.
- **Don’t** feel offended if they refuse your offer of help or turn to someone else for comfort.

- **Do** continue to stay in contact and express your support.
- **Do** make specific offers of help; cook dinner, cut the grass, accompany them on a walk.
- **Do** provide the opportunity for them to talk about their loss, knowing that just sitting in silence can also be very supportive.
- **Do** accept that they are grieving in the way that best suits them.
- **Do** remember special occasions such as birthdays and anniversaries

Finally, mind yourself. Supporting a bereaved person is hard work. Know your limits and only offer to do what you can.

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