

When Someone You Care about is Bereaved

Grief is our natural response to loss. While everyone grieves in their own way, it is important to remember that feeling irritable, confused, relieved, bitter, angry or guilty is just as much a part of grieving as feeling sad and lonely.

Following a death, bereaved people often find it hard to take care of day-to-day tasks. Their energy levels may be low, sleeping and eating patterns may be disrupted and their concentration and memory may be poor.

Grieving does not follow any set of stages, nor do people feel a bit better as time passes. Bereaved people are likely to have some days when they feel they are doing quite well and other days when they may feel overwhelmed by their loss. Sometimes a difficult day may be triggered by an anniversary or a special day. Hearing a certain song on the radio, seeing a familiar-looking figure on the street or smelling a certain scent can also impact on their grief, unexpectedly flooding them with memories.

The needs of a bereaved person are often quite simple – they may need some emotional support, a listening ear, a shared cup of tea. They may also need some practical help – someone to answer the phone or pick the children up from school.

You may worry that you are intruding, or that you are not qualified, and may do or say the wrong thing. Remember, you do not need any particular skills or training to be supportive. More important than **who** you are, is **how** you are in the company of the grieving person. Often the best help that you can offer is your company and a willingness to listen and accept how they feel.

Sometimes in our desire to help we end up hurrying people along in their grief. We try to cheer them up, to take them out of themselves and to encourage them to get on with their lives. While some distraction can be useful at times, it is important to let the bereaved person find their own way through their grief.

When someone you care about is bereaved

- Try to attend the removal or funeral if this is appropriate.
- Take the time to make contact either by writing or by phone. A personal note that expresses your condolences and mentions any fond memories you have of the person who died can be very comforting.
- Express your sympathy in a simple way. Avoid clichés such as ‘it was for the best’, or ‘life goes on’ as they may give offence. Phrases such as ‘I’m so sorry’ or ‘you are in my thoughts’ are better. There are no words that will take away the pain.
- Make a brief visit and offer your practical help.
- Don’t avoid a bereaved person out of embarrassment or a fear of upsetting them. They may believe you don’t care enough to sympathise with them.
- Try not to tell them that you know how they feel; you can never truly know how someone else feels.
- Your own losses may be triggered when you talk to a bereaved person, but try not to recount stories of your own, or other people’s losses. It is rarely helpful.

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 your friend 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 everyday 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, bereaved people are facing into months and years of reminders of their loss and adjustments they need to make.

As time goes by

- Don't assume they are 'over it' or have enough help. If you are unsure how to help, just ask.
- Don't avoid mentioning the person who has died. Most bereaved people welcome the chance to talk. You do not lessen grief by avoiding the subject.
- Don't offer advice on how they should feel, act or get on with their lives. Allow them space to make their own decisions.
- Try not to make vague offers of help such as 'Call me if you need anything'. Bereaved people may find it hard to reach out and ask for that help. Make specific offers of help – cook dinner, cut the grass, go for a walk with them.
- Don't feel offended if they refuse your offer of help or turn to someone else for comfort.
- Try to remember special occasions such as birthdays and anniversaries.
- Finally, mind yourself. Supporting a bereaved person is hard work. Know your own limits and only offer to do what you can reasonably do.

Further reading

If there is anything I can do...How to help someone who has been bereaved, Caroline Doughty, (2007)