



Ways to Support Someone who is Grieving

- Recognize that it can be hard to make decisions and that the bereaved may change his or her mind about schedules or activities. Accept the need for flexibility and last-minute changes in plans.
- Allow for the expression of emotions. Listen, listen, listen. Be present. It may be important for the person to tell the story of the relationship, the illness and the death, and to do this more than once. Emotions are varied and complex in grief. Allowing someone to voice their anger, sadness, regret, guilt, fear, and emptiness - along with their good memories of the deceased - is a way to help them.
- Resist the impulse to give advice or to try to “fix” another’s grief. Grief is a process that cannot be rushed. People often feel very alone in their grief. Companionship through grief is one of the greatest gifts you can give.
- Offer concrete help. Provide a meal or eat with the bereaved if he or she is now eating alone because of the death. Offer to help with thank you notes, grocery shopping, mowing, and errands. Ask what you can do to help with day-to-day life.
- Give the gift of memory by sharing some favorite memories you have of the deceased. Give some photos or a memory book. Honor the memory of the deceased by making a donation in his/her name.
- Stay in touch over time. Realize that grief takes its own course and is unique for every person. Typically birthdays, anniversaries, and holidays are times when contacting the bereaved will be appreciated. Keep in touch by phone, text, email, Facebook, or in person.
- Encourage self-care. Accompany the bereaved for a walk, out for a meal, to a movie, and invite them to social events that are comfortable for them.



When to Seek Professional Help with Grief

Individual bereavement counseling provides one-on-one support, education, and professional help with coping mechanisms. Group counseling offers the benefit of support from others going through similar grief processes.

What do bereavement counselors do?

- Provide education about normal grief
- Listen to you and witness your journey in grief
- Share suggestions from others on what has been helpful in their grief
- Discuss ways to help you get through the day and the night
- Help you plan for difficult days such as birthdays, holidays, and anniversaries
- Discuss ways that you might choose to honor and remember your loved one
- Help you change your negative thoughts and images into positive ones
- Teach you ways to ease the anxiety you feel in your grief
- Encourage self-care and assist in re-establishing healthy patterns of eating, sleeping, working, and relaxing
- Provide acceptance of your individual grief experience
- Help you sort through any mixed feelings you may have about the deceased
- Support you in letting go of the pain of loss without letting go of the person
- Assist you finding meaning and purpose as you go forward in your life

For children, some indications that professional counseling might be helpful may include: changes in sleeping and/or eating patterns, behavior issues, decline in grades, isolation, panic attacks and/or a reluctance to attend school.

For adults, some indications that professional counseling might be helpful may include: prolonged difficulties with sleeping and/or eating, lack of self-care, social isolation, excessive use of alcohol and/or drugs, a complicated relationship with the deceased, multiple losses, a traumatic death, or a history of depression, anxiety, and/or other mental health issues.

Individual bereavement counseling and bereavement groups are available to hospice families and are listed on the HPCI website. Bereavement counselors are assigned to every hospice family and typically initiate contact with the primary bereaved a month after the death. HPCI bereavement groups are available to the community as well as to hospice families. Referrals for individual bereavement counseling for non-hospice families can be accessed by contacting HPCI bereavement counselors at (315)735-6487 ext. 1214.



Anger and Grief

There are many emotions that come with the death of a loved one - sadness, regret, loneliness, fear, anxiety, emptiness, gratitude, and anger. For many people the anger doesn't seem right or acceptable, yet it is one of the normal and common reactions to loss.

People feel anger at the medical establishment, anger at relatives who may not have helped or supported the person who died, anger at God, anger at themselves – the WHY questions are paramount. Why did God let this happen, why didn't she go to see her doctor sooner, why didn't the doctor diagnose and treat this better, why her when she was such a good person, why me? It is very common and normal to feel angry at the person who died, to feel abandoned even in the same moment as rationally knowing that the person did not choose to die and did not want to die. The death changes your whole life, your future, your dreams, your plans for the day, month, and years ahead – of course it is normal to feel angry! Anger is normal, but often people “stuff” their anger because they deem it to be an unacceptable emotion. Realize all emotions are acceptable – they just ARE. There is no right or wrong emotion. It is what one does with an emotion that makes it helpful or hurtful. When anger is “stuffed” it often comes out in physical symptoms or turns into depression. Anger can be suppressed for some time, but it usually builds and builds until it comes up suddenly and often unpleasantly in a totally unrelated situation, such as becoming unduly irritated at work or at home and overreacting to something that normally would not cause a big response.

So what do you do with your anger? First of all, express it. Choose someone whom you trust to listen without trying to suppress your expression or “fix” you. Then let out your anger in words. Another option is to take some time by yourself to “write out” your anger. Don't hold back! Go ahead and rant and rave and get it all out. Both experiences may prove to be very freeing. We also hold anger as a physical force within ourselves, so finding a physical outlet is very healthy. Pound a pillow, kick a ball, chop wood, do some vigorous exercise, or yell loudly in a place where others will not hear you. Connecting with nature can also help dispel anger – being outside, walking in a park, in the woods, or along a stream.

For many people, animals can also be a source of support and comfort. Dogs are chosen as therapy animals for a reason; they have an emotional intelligence and sensitivity to our pain.

Finally, anger can be a driving force for making positive change. Mothers Against Drunk Driving was started by mothers who were angry because so many people drove under the influence. Putting energy into supporting cancer walks, heart walks, and other organizations that seek a cure for disease can take your anger and direct it in a way that helps others. Helping others is a way to also help yourself.

Accept your anger. Express your anger. Use your anger. It is normal. It is OK.



Changes in Social Circles Following a Death

People are often puzzled by the support or lack of support they get from others following a death. “I thought she would be there for me but she hasn’t reached out once,” or, “I hardly know him but he has been there for me at times when I was overwhelmed and needed a shoulder to lean on.”

Death teaches us so many things. It teaches us how precious life is, how the little things don’t matter, and that meaning comes out of our relationships not out of our career success or social status. It teaches us what to say, or not say, when we attend wakes and funerals. It teaches us that grief is not resolved or even felt in the short period of Bereavement Leave granted by most workplaces. It teaches us that grief is a process which each person goes through in his or her own way and in his or her own time. It teaches us that it can really hurt when someone says, “It was for the best,” or, “He is in a better place,” and other such sayings, which are often said by well-meaning people who may not know how to truly lend support.

If you find you are not getting the support from others that you expected, please realize that it is not out of unkindness or lack of caring that they are not reaching out to you. It may simply be a lack of experience with loss. Our society does not “do” grief. Most people are uncomfortable in the face of grief and have no idea what to say or do to be supportive.

Ironically, you are put in the position of telling others what you need and what can help. Don’t hesitate to make a list of things that may help you, such as, “I could use help with meals because there is so much to do right now and I am so exhausted,” “It would help if you could give me the name of someone reliable to mow my lawn and plow my driveway,” “It would be such a help if you could watch my children for a few hours so I could have some time to myself.” You may have to say that it would help to just be able to talk about the person who died and remember him or her and all you went through together. Sometimes you have to be the one to introduce “the elephant in the room,” because others are under the mistaken impression that talking about the person who died will make your pain worse. You will have to tell people that it is hard to make decisions and that you might change your mind at the last minute, that you need to be with people but you also need alone time, that grief triggers come out of the blue with songs on the radio and places that remind you of your loved one, and that the tears will come, then the tears will stop, and you just need their presence through the tough moments.

Your friendships may well shift in the months and years following the death. Old friendships may fade and new ones may develop. Embrace those who can be there for you, educate those you want to be there for you, and accept the fact that your needs and values have changed because of the death.



Patterns of Grief in Women and Men

There are common patterns in the ways in which men and women each experience and express grief. Each person is an individual and not everyone fits these patterns. However, it is helpful to understand typical patterns when seeing how family members and friends respond to the death of a loved one. Everyone grieves at his or her own pace, intensity, style, and rhythm. Difficulties can arise when other family members and friends do not react and cope in the same way and this can result in assumptions, misunderstandings, and tension.

Men often process strong feelings through actions and activities. They typically like to fix things, do sports, be physically active and spend time out in nature. They are less likely to verbalize their feelings. Men often choose to deal with their grief alone; they may seek solitude or spend more time with their hobbies away from others. They are often socialized to not cry and not show their emotions. Boys are often conditioned to “be strong and not cry.” Men sometimes express anger in response to their own feelings of sadness. Often boys are told they “need to be the man of the house” when their father dies. Throughout history men have been expected to protect and provide for their families. These societal expectations can put pressure on men who are grieving. How can they protect their family members from the pain of grief? How can they handle their own feelings when they are supposed to be the strong ones who don’t show emotions or “weakness?” How can they be reliable providers when they are distracted by their own grief? Men often respond more cognitively to a loss, emphasizing thinking more than feeling. Men commonly make attempts to figure things out, make plans about what to do going forward, and come up with an explanation that will help them cope. Men often say they want to be “realistic” about the loss and use problem solving strategies to figure out how to cope.

Women tend to talk about their feelings, benefit from “telling the story” more than once, and tend to cry more than men. This can lead to tension after a death in the family, when the men in the family may want to dig into the “to do” list that follows a death and clear out the house and possessions, while women need to tend to their feelings before being ready to do the tasks. Women tend to mobilize and use their support systems more than men; they are more social in their grief. Women are more likely to join bereavement groups and share their feelings and experiences with others. They are more likely to seek individual bereavement counseling as well.

There is no right or wrong way to grieve. Styles of grief can be blended, and a person can have some male and some female coping patterns in his/her grief response. It can help to understand the gender patterns when offering support and when experiencing grief with others. Grief experiences and responses vary from person to person, although many commonalities exist.



Guilt

When someone you love dies, grief often includes feelings of guilt. “I should have... I could have...I would have...Why didn’t I...? Why didn’t he...?”, are normal and common questions bereaved people ask themselves. Often these questions stick in the mind and play over and over. There is the guilt about things you wish you had done, things you wish you had not done, things you wish you had said, things you wish you had not said. There is “if only” guilt: if only I had noticed the symptoms, told him not to do that, done things differently, saw this coming, gotten here sooner, been here more often, watched her more closely, questioned the doctors more, not given that medication. There is survivor guilt, when you feel guilt that you are the one still alive. There is recovery guilt, when you “catch” yourself feeling happy or laughing, when you find you are moving on with your life and not thinking constantly about your loved one.

While guilt is normal and common, it can become incapacitating. If you let guilt take over your mind and your emotions, it can prevent you from coping in your day-to-day life. One way to try to sort out your guilt is to write down which of your guilt feelings are realistic and which are not realistic. Take a rational, cognitive approach to your grief. You may find this process results in an empty column of realistic guilt. Of course you couldn’t know what was coming. You let your loved one make the medical decisions for himself or herself. Of course, sometimes you were tired and perhaps not as patient as you could have been. Much of grief guilt tends to be unrealistic, emotional guilt. It can take time to let the cognitive analysis of your guilt sift down to your heart and emotions.

There are some techniques that can help you work through your guilt. Talk it through with a trusted person who can help you with the “realistic vs. unrealistic guilt exercise.” Focus on the positive parts of the relationship with your loved one, the happy memories, and all the things you did right in the relationship. Acknowledge that you did the best you could with the knowledge and the energy you had, as well as other obligations you had throughout the illness and at the time of death. Understand that 80% of communication is nonverbal, so your behavior and caregiving spoke volumes even if you did not utter the words you wish now you had. Use a thought-stopping technique if you get caught in a guilt spiral; tell yourself to JUST STOP and do something to get your mind off your guilt. Go outside, call a friend, listen to or play music, do something physically vigorous. Women tend to feel more guilt and dwell on it more than men. If you are a spiritual person, then talking with your faith leader might help. Think about how your loved one would view your guilt – would he or she tell you that there is no reason for you to feel guilty? Seek some individual counseling if you find that guilt is impacting your functioning and self-care. Join a grief support group where others understand because they are going through the same process of grief. Often it is harder to forgive ourselves than to forgive others. Be kind to yourself.



Changes in Family Relationships Following Death

When a family member dies, relationships change within the family. There is someone missing, an empty chair at the table, a role unfilled, future plans forever altered. When the person who died is a parent leaving a spouse and adult children, often the attention in the family turns to the remaining parent. Adult children may worry about the remaining parent, who is all the more precious because of the death. The grief for the death of the first parent is sometimes postponed until the second parent dies. There can be tension among the adult children if the responsibilities for caregiving are perceived to have been more heavily placed on one of the children, who then may feel taken for granted. Wills can cause real stress when family members feel the will was unfair to one or more family members. Grief can come out as anger for some family members, which causes further problems in family relationships and communication.

When both parents have died there can be a large shift in family relationships. Often communication in families goes through, originates from, or is about the parents. When the parents are gone, the adult children can be so busy with their lives that there is less communication and sharing among them. Sometimes one family member takes on the role of the family organizer, arranging for family get-togethers at holidays and other times, and facilitating communication among members. Other families may drift apart as adult children focus on their own families or avoid addressing difficult and often-times longstanding conflict and emotions.

When an adult child in a family dies there is often survivor guilt on the part of parents, who may feel it is out of the normal order of things for a child to pre-decease the parents. Differences in grief patterns according to generation or gender can lead to tension. The older generation is often more accepting of death as a natural part of life and more apt to “pull themselves up and get on with life,” while younger generations may have more of a need to express feelings and talk about their grief. If some family members remember only the good things about the deceased, this can cause resentment in other family members.

When a young child dies, the stress on the family system is intense. Mothers and fathers tend to grieve differently and are not always able to support one another. The loss of future dreams, seeing the child’s friends go through developmental milestones, processing the grief of other children in the family, as well as having to answer the question, “How many children do you have?”, often tax the coping skills of parents. Grief support through individual counseling and group counseling with other bereaved parents may be very helpful.

Time does not heal all wounds, but letting time pass and letting everyone adjust to the death and changes in family relationships is a good way to start coping. At the time of death family members are stressed and exhausted; giving everyone time and space to recover can reduce tension. Seek support from friends, extended family, spiritual communities, and hospice bereavement counselors. Everyone grieves in his or her own way and in his or her own time; getting support from outside the family can help with your own unique grief needs.