

Supporting the Bereaved

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Despite the fact that death is always present among the living, many of us feel quite ill-prepared to provide sensitive and meaningful *ongoing* support to a grieving friend, colleague or loved one. In the days immediately surrounding the death and the funeral, our culture provides us the “scripts” to follow. The needs of the survivors for social support are obvious, and the culture provides us with clearly defined avenues to express support- food, prayer, sympathy cards, condolence letters, flowers, memorial donations, funeral visitation and the funeral or memorial service itself. “If there is anything I can do, just let me know” are words mourners hear over and over in those early days. For a moment in time, the world seems to stop and center on the grieving family, and just as quickly, the rest of the world seems to revert to “back to normal”. The funeral over, the world of grieving parents, spouses, children and other loved ones does not go “back to normal”.

For the survivors, learning to live with loss is all too often a lonely experience. Too exhausted by the physical and emotional demands of acute grief, and sensitive to being a burden on others, few grieverers will be comfortable availing themselves of the “Call me if you need anything” offer. “How are you doing?” rarely elicits a truly honest response from the bereaved. “We become very good actors, looking better than we really are” is a statement that many bereaved individuals easily relate to. The strategy of ignoring the “elephant in the room” for fear of causing pain often increases the pain and isolation of the bereaved. Even though our offers and inquiries are well meant, those of us on the periphery of loss feel stuck without any sense of what we could do that would help ease the pain of someone we care about.

Meaningful support becomes much easier once one understands that grief is not resolved according to a timeline—the funeral does not mark the end of grieving, but is, for many, only the beginning of their journey. Physical exhaustion and emotional distress are normal and grief seems to ebb and flow in its intensity. Under any circumstances, dealing with change and multiple demands taxes our resources. For the bereaved, personal resources are even more severely challenged. Knowing this, there are many practical things that one can offer to do that can make the difficult weeks and months after the funeral easier. Take a minute to think about all the demands of daily living that require time and energy. Taking over a meal that can be easily reheated, offering to take the car to be washed or serviced, helping out with lawn care, calling and asking if there is anything you can pick up for them while you are out, making sure the garbage cans get out in time for pick-up, dropping by a book of postage stamps—all are examples of simple things that communicate caring and provide nurture.

“I know this must be a terribly difficult time for you. I’m wondering how are you doing these days?” communicates your concern and your awareness that healing takes time. Don’t say you know how they feel, because you don’t—this is not your loss. Let go of the need to have the answers or “cure” the pain. Most of us don’t take unsolicited advice, so leave it at home. Instead, be a good listener. Compassion and acceptance are more helpful. Recollecting and reminiscing about the deceased is often a source of comfort, rather than a taboo subject. Sharing memories and remembering is an important part of the process. Tears are healing and don’t be embarrassed if tears flow—just come prepared with a few tissues in your purse or pocket.

Staying in touch and letting the bereaved know you are thinking of them doesn’t need to take hours of your time. Going out for a cup of coffee, sharing a sandwich or informal meal, keeping you company at the Little League game are often easily accepted invitations. Notes or cards, “just because I’m thinking of you” can brighten an otherwise empty day. Sending a special card or making a call at times that are likely to be more difficult, such as birthdays, Mother’s or Father’s Day, wedding anniversaries, and anniversaries of the death are widely appreciated.

No one should have to experience the pain of loss in isolation. Due to the generous support of community donors, **Pathways of Hope** provides professional grief counseling and group support services to anyone in the community impacted by loss. If you or someone you know is struggling with the loss of a loved one, please feel free to call us at (937) 258-4991. We may be able to ease the journey to healing and hope.