

# Guidelines for Helping those who are Grieving

It is very difficult to witness the suffering of someone you care about when their baby has died. But if you truly care, you will know the importance of being a companion in the midst of their suffering by supporting them in their lengthy process of mourning. It may take months or years to adjust to life without their baby, but with the love, encouragement and acceptance of family and friends, the quality of their new lives will have a much deeper meaning. So much depends on the long-term love and acceptance they receive.

## Truth About Grief

Grieving is not an easy process and it has no time frame. It portrays a myriad of unpredictable and confusing emotions. Frequently the family is in shock the first year and does not feel the full impact until the second year. This is sometimes when it is expected that healing has taken place. But this is not true. Support must be even stronger after the first year and must continue for as long as necessary. Their hearts are broken and this pain implodes the inner recesses of their whole being. Only those who are living the loss know the magnitude of this pain and how it permeates every aspect of their lives. What families need is an acceptance of their intense and complicated feelings without ever being judged.

## What Helps?

True “help” or “compassion” is not about fixing or making them better. It’s about loving them, offering practical help, and telling them you care. It’s also about allowing them to share their story again and again. Those who are grieving sometimes have an insatiable need to talk about their loss. The “revisiting” of the experience can be tiring to those who are hearing the story, but it is important to remember that it has a therapeutic value for the grieving family. And then there are also individuals who cannot verbalize their pain or express how they really feel. In those situations, it is necessary to understand the true healing potential taking place as you sit together in complete SILENCE. There is no need to fill each moment with words, but rather to trust that being with and loving those who are suffering is the greatest gift you can offer them. Also, remember that tears, yours and those experiencing the loss, are a cleansing: a purging of grief and a purification of the heart. Do not hesitate to let yourself also feel the loss.

Try these helpful responses, and avoid the not as helpful ones:

### Helpful Responses:

- “I am so sorry for you”
- “I am at a loss to know what to say, but I sense how difficult this must be for you”
- “Are there others you want near”
- “Take all the time you need”
- “Do you need some time alone”
- “Grief can be a long journey, try to be patient with yourself”
- Listen more than you talk.
- Answer questions honestly, keeping in mind that some questions don’t have an answer
- Refer to the baby by name
- Include all family members in the conversation
- Ask if they have any special requests of you

### **Not Helpful Responses:**

- “I understand how you feel”
- “Death was a blessing”
- “It was God’s will”
- “It happened for the best”
- “Something good will come of this”
- “You must be strong, don’t cry”
- “Don’t take it so hard”
- “You will get over it”
- “It has happened. You must accept it.”
- “You have your whole life ahead of you”
- “You are lucky to have had him/her for as long as you did”
- “Try to keep yourself together”
- “You must be relieved”
- “You must be strong for others”
- “You can’t go on like this, it is not healthy”
- “Things work out for the best”
- Don’t dominate the conversation
- Don’t pass judgment
- Don’t avoid the bereaved because of your own discomfort
- Don’t change the subject when the bereaved talk about their baby
- Don’t attempt to answer questions for which you don’t have answers

### **Practical Help**

What is most important is your willingness to reach out to those in need by visiting them, bringing a meal, babysitting, listening, cleaning, shopping, or doing anything that lessens their burden of every day chores. Grief takes a tremendous amount of energy and most grieving parents are exhausted. Their emotions are heightened by the stress of their grief and sometimes it is even difficult to breathe. They desperately need help but are hesitant to call.

When trying to support a grieving family, it is preferable to take the initiative to visit their home and say, “I’m here to help in any way I can.” Return to their home as often as possible and offer continued support. Send cards or call frequently - just to say, “I’m thinking about you.” Patience is vitally important when you are with those who are grieving. Their hearts will be somewhat restored in the years to come, but it is your understanding, your comforting shoulder and your love that are necessary in order for healing to take place.

# YOU will make a difference when you:

- Always respond in a non-judgmental way
- Understand that grief is not an easy upward climb. It is one step forward, 3 back, 2 steps forward, 4 back. There are continuous backslides that may frighten the griever, catch the griever off guard, and sometimes make him/her feel crazy. This is normal.
- Remember the baby's birthday/anniversary, and be aware that the family may be more emotional around holidays.
- Visit the family often
- Avoid giving advice (medical or otherwise) and avoid blaming people, situations, etc.
- Send "thinking of you" cards
- Call frequently
- Recognize that, although it is wonderful that your children are alive and well, bereaved parents may be sensitive to other parents talking excessively about their children's achievements and good fortune. Their deceased baby will miss so many opportunities for graduation, marriage, babies, careers, etc. The shattered dreams can hurt.
- Stop to say you'd like to help
- Listen to the family's story of their baby.... Over and over
- Understand the family's need to visit the cemetery, celebrate the birthday, create a memorial garden or do other things that keep the baby's memory alive
- Donate to a meaningful cause in memory of the baby
- Accept the many pictures and remembrances around the family's home
- Understand that this is a lifelong process that will NEVER be over but the extreme pain will very slowly change.
- Have no expectations that bereaved families will behave the way YOU want them to behave. This is their personal journey that is an individual experience. What is needed is total respect and reverence. Bereaved parents know that the depth of their pain is almost beyond their comprehension and that their hearts will always be scarred from this deep wound.
- Be compassionate and always remember their baby... ALWAYS

Copies of a **Care Card** with suggestions of what to say and what not to say to the newly bereaved are available for distribution to friends, family and coworkers. Please contact Christine Scott at the WNY Perinatal Bereavement Network, Inc. for a complimentary pack of these helpful and useful guides:

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