

Often times family and friends ask what can I do for the bereaved? They wish to offer their comfort and support but are not always sure what is appropriate to say or do. Such hesitancy often leads them to avoid contact with the bereaved altogether or even to say the wrong things albeit from good intentions. Many a widow for example, can tell you from personal experience that out of the numerous friends that both she and her husband had together when he was still alive, only a small handful, if that, still remain loyal and concerned with her welfare. Ironically, sometimes it is the grieving who have to call their friends or reach out to them in a way that eases their discomfort and allows them to realise that it is O.K. for them to extend their care in return. The majority of people are actually between being the loyal few and the 'avoiders'. This pamphlet is intended to assist those who would like to offer their support in a constructive and suitable way but are uncertain exactly of the actual "do's and don'ts".

Certainly, the most important thing that one can do to support someone who is grieving is simply to be present. True friends do not avoid or forsake others when a death happens but rather show their care with both words as well as with specific action. Even if one feels uncertain or uncomfortable about what to say to the bereaved, the attendance at a funeral or memorial is a most significant way of showing respect and concern. Often people will even attend such a remembrance and express their condolences even if they did not know the deceased but are friends or co-workers with a family member instead. Even if you are of a different religious or cultural background from the deceased and the funeral rites accompanying their farewell your presence is important. There is an old saying that the "funeral service is not only for the dead but for the living as well". The bereaved will always remember and treasure such a sign of consideration and condolence.

Once at such a ceremony there may be an uncertainty as to what to do or say to the grieving. A simple handshake or hug, and a spoken "I'm sorry", are always appropriate and appreciated at such times. Avoid cliches such as: "It is God's will", or "I know just how you feel" or "It's probably for the best". Such statements, although well-meaning are actually insensitive, upsetting, and theologically suspect. It is also important to offer your assistance in any way that the bereaved might benefit from. Naturally, your relationship and closeness to the bereaved form part of what an suitable service might be.

It is important to propose to do a specific task or help with a particular need. A general offer will usually be greeted with an equally indefinite thanks and vague reply. Be specific! Offering to take the person shopping, or to baby-sit, or to prepare a meal, are better than a general offer of assistance. It is even suitable to drop off a casserole or other dish, or phone and propose either to do the grocery shopping for the family or take them to the store when you go on Thursday morning or whatever time and date is mutually convenient. Again, a lot of these specifics depend on how close you are in both friendship and distance.

During the initial stages of a loss your friendship can be very helpful but your ongoing support will also be needed in the days that lie ahead. Call the bereaved regularly and visit. Stop by for a coffee or tea, or invite them out for supper at your place or a restaurant. Allow them to talk about their loss and to share stories about the deceased. It is O.K. to talk about the person who has died, to use their name and to acknowledge the reality that they are missed. Contrary to many people's belief, the bereaved need to hear the name of their departed loved one spoken aloud and to hear others affirm their love of them and their own feelings of loss. Indeed, the need to do so is an important part of the natural grieving process.

Simply listening and being a 'big ear' is one of the best helps you can give; but listening in an active, non-judgmental and empathetic way. Remember, sharing and even laughing over past memories and stories are healthy forms of articulation. Allowing the bereaved to tell their story and retell their memories often over and over again are important steps in their grief therapy. Often their own family cannot bear to hear these repeated recollections and so you can provide a suitable outlet. Allowing the bereaved to express emotions of anger or other such 'negative' feelings are also natural. As a friend you are meant to be a shoulder, an ear, a caring non-judgement presence. You are not meant to chat-up, cheer-up, or to entertain in order to distract the grieving from their pain. They need a true friend who will authentically be there for them in a supportive and an objective way; not a 'Pollyannish' figure who tries to distract them from their loss. Letting them cry or express the roller coast ride of emotions they might be experiencing is totally acceptable.

Do not give advice unless specifically asked and even then do not jump to the point of making the actual decisions for the bereaved. They must make their own resolves, as it is they who must likewise live by the consequences. Discouraging them from making any major decision in the first year of their loss is acceptable. Selling their house, moving in with their next-of-kin, getting remarried in a few months, are all examples of a major decision. Be patient and understanding of any remarks or actions the bereaved might express. Remember, you are there to fulfil their needs and not your own. Sometimes you and your offer of help might even be rejected. Do not hold this against your friend but rather wait a bit and offer again from a different angle and in a different way.

Likewise, do not forget anniversaries, birthdays, holidays, and the actual anniversary of the death. A card, a call, a flower or a visit all show your continuing concern; such care helps the bereaved feel supported and is accepted as a sensitive expression of your ongoing understanding. If the family is religious than a Mass or memorial card might be appropriate, or just a note saying that you said a prayer for them today, on this the anniversary of their loved one's death, birthday, or whatever occasion, are always appropriate. Where applicable offer to take the grieving person to Church, Temple, Mosque, or Synagogue. Likewise, driving them to the cemetery or mausoleum is a privilege that will always be appreciated. Such spiritual support can be of immense comfort. As time goes on, it is important to encourage the bereaved to again get

involved in the greater world around them. Social outings, clubs, hobbies and entertainment, can be eased into better if a friend like you is the accompanying support and bridge.

If along this way of support the bereaved 'get stuck' in a particular stage and cannot seem to get beyond it, a suggestion of professional help by you might also be the best support you can give. Even then your ongoing assistance may still be needed to give the bereaved the strength to carry out such a resolve. Eventually, the grieving will find their way to acceptance but it takes time and a lot of grief work on their part. As a friend, you can make the difference in facilitating this process, for another old saying reminds us that "a grief shared is a grief halved". Likewise, one of the noblest and kindest things you can do for another is to support them through their journey of loss.

### **Community Resources**

Depending on your locale, some support sources may not be present. A family doctor, mental health centre, hospital, social worker, counsellor, clergy or your funeral director can assist you with an appropriate referral in these cases.

HOSPICE - Supports the dying person and their family, before, during and after a death.

COMPASSIONATE FRIENDS - Supports bereaved persons

BEREAVEMENT SUPPORT GROUPS - These are found in the community through mental health, social work, hospice or church groups.

### **Suggested Reading**

There are many books available on a variety of topics dealing with death and grief. The following are a few of my favourites.

Carroli, D. Living with dying: A loving guide for family and close friends, McGraw Hill, 1985.

Cassini, Kathleen K. & Rogers, Jacqueline L., I Want to Help But I Don't Know How, Griefwork Inc., 1985

Freese, A., Living through grief and growing with it, Barnes & Noble Books.

Singer, L., Sirot, M., Rodd, S. Beyond Loss: A practical guide through grief to a meaningful life, Dutton, 1988.

Temes, R., Living with an Empty Chair, Irvington, 1984.