

FOR FRIENDS, FAMILY & COMMUNITY MEMBERS: SUPPORTING THOSE WHO ARE GRIEVING

When someone you care about is grieving, it can be tough to know what to say or do. It's common to feel helpless, awkward or unsure. You may be afraid of intruding, saying the wrong thing, or making the person feel even worse. Or maybe you feel there's little you can do to make things better. You are also dealing with your own grief, and the need to heal.

While you can't take away the pain of the loss, you *can* provide much-needed comfort and support. There are many ways to help a grieving family member or friend, starting with letting the person know you care. Consider sharing these suggestions with other family members, friends, neighbors, or members of the community who may appreciate guidance in supporting a grieving family.

Understanding the Bereavement Process

The better your understanding of grief and the process someone is going through, the better equipped you'll be to help a bereaved family member or friend:

- **There is no right or wrong way to grieve.** Grief does not always unfold in orderly, predictable stages. It can be an emotional roller coaster, with unpredictable highs, lows and setbacks. Everyone grieves differently, so avoid telling the bereaved what they "should" be feeling or doing.
- **Grief may involve extreme emotions and behaviors.** Feelings of guilt, anger, despair and fear are common. A grieving person may yell to the heavens, obsess about the death, lash out at loved ones, or cry for hours on end. Don't judge them or take their grief reactions personally.
- **There is no set timetable for grieving.** For many people, grief after bereavement typically takes 18 to 24 months, but for others, the grieving process may be longer or shorter. Don't pressure the bereaved to move on or make them feel like they've been grieving too long. This can actually slow their healing.

Listen With Compassion

Almost everyone worries about what to say to people who are grieving. But knowing how to listen is much more important. Often, well-meaning people avoid talking about the death or mentioning the deceased person. However, the bereaved need to feel that their loss is acknowledged, that it's not too terrible to talk about, and that their loved one won't be forgotten.

While you should never try to force someone to open up, it's important to let the bereaved know they have permission to talk about the loss. Talk candidly about the person who died and don't steer away from the subject if the deceased's name comes up. Invite the grieving person to openly express his or her feelings. Try simply saying, "I'm here if you want to talk."

- **Accept and acknowledge all feelings.** Let the grieving person know that it's okay to cry in front of you, to get angry, or to break down.
- **Be willing to sit in silence.** Don't press if the grieving person doesn't feel like talking. You can offer comfort and support with your silent presence. If you can't think of something to say, just offer eye contact, a squeeze of the hand, or a reassuring hug.
- **Let the bereaved talk about how their loved one died.** People who are grieving may need to tell the story over and over again, sometimes in minute detail. Be patient. Repeating the story is a way of processing and accepting the death for some.
- **Offer comfort and reassurance without minimizing the loss.** Tell the bereaved that what they are feeling is okay. If you've gone through a similar loss, share your own experience if you think it would help. However, don't give unsolicited advice, claim to "know" what the person is feeling, or compare your grief to theirs.
- **It's OK to cry with the grieving person.**

A Few Resources

The following series of books may be a place to start depending on your individual situation.

- *Healing A Teens Grieving Heart - 100 Practical Ideas for Families, Friends and Caregivers*, by Alan Wolfelt, PH. D. (ISBN 978-1-879651-24-1)
- *Healing A Child's Grieving Heart - 100 Practical Ideas for Families, Friends and Caregivers*, by Alan Wolfelt, PH. D. (ISBN 978-1-879651-28-9)
- *Healing A Friend's Grieving Heart - 100 Practical Ideas for Helping Someone You Love Through Loss*, by Alan Wolfelt, PH. D. (ISBN 978-1-879651-26-5)