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Supporting the Bereaved

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Receiving help from others is an important component in recovering from grief. Friends often want to support the family of the deceased, but find that they don't know what to do or say.

Research on grief indicates that people who have experienced a loss do not always find the reactions of their friends, however well-intended, supportive. For example, Katherine Walsh-Burke (2006, p. 76) describes the following five common misconceptions about grief in her book *Grief and Loss*:

1. "Time heals all wounds." Grieving a close loss takes time. In fact, the most "difficult period is often three months onwards after the death when the bereaved person will still feel an acute sense of grief" (Lendrum & Syme, 1993 as cited in Cooke, 2000, p. 93) but when friends no longer offer support.
2. "People find it too painful to talk about their loss." Talking about the details of the death often helps the bereaved to accept the reality of the death. Although there will be times when they choose to avoid talk about the death, preferring to have a normal conversation. Friends can show their concern by asking, "How are you doing?" and then continuing the conversation based on their response.
3. "Crying indicates that someone is not coping well." It is common for the bereaved to have strong emotions—anger, guilt, anxiety, and/or profound sadness. Crying is a normal and healthy way to express the feelings. Friends can help by being supportive and empathic listeners.
4. "The grieving process should last about one year." Although the first birthday, anniversary, holiday, etc. without the deceased is usually especially difficult, there is no prescribed timeline for grieving. Each person experiences grief in their own unique way. It is important that they do what feels comfortable to them.

5. "Quickly putting grieving behind will speed the process of healing." It is not helpful to try to speed up or block the strong emotions. The only way to heal is to experience and work through the feelings.

In addition to the above, Walsh-Burke (2006, p. 78) listed other support attempts that are usually viewed as unhelpful. They are:

- Saying "I know how you feel" or "I understand."
- Talking about your own losses (me-too-ism).
- Giving unsolicited advice.
- Using clichés.
- Challenging the other person's perception of their situation or feelings.

Studies (Cooke, 2000; Walsh-Burke, 2006) show that the bereaved are comforted by kind words and offers of practical help. Listed below are some examples:

- Instead of saying, "Call if there is anything I can do," give the bereaved a list of specific things you are willing to do listed 1, 2, 3 Give help freely without making the bereaved ask for it.
- Provide prepared meals.
- Help the family prepare for the memorial service by polishing their shoes.
- Remind the bereaved to take care of their own health by getting adequate nutrition and rest.
- Write about your favorite memories of the deceased and give them and/or photos to the family.
- Offer to transport their children to school activities or their distant relatives from and to the airport.
- Offer to let their out-of-town relatives stay at your home.

- Invite the bereaved children over for pizza or to watch a movie. Children especially need to take breaks from grief.
- Assist with shopping, cleaning, and running errands.
- Make a list of donations so thank you cards can be sent.
- Address and stamp envelopes for the thank you cards.
- Offer to stay at their home for security purposes while they attend memorial services.
- Donate to a charity in memory of the deceased.
- Send flowers in honor of the deceased.
- Transport flowers and plants from the funeral home to wherever the family wants them taken. Some prefer to donate dried arrangements and plants to nursing homes, churches, hospitals, etc. because they do not want another reminder of the death in their home.
- Provide child care at the funeral home and in the days following so that the bereaved can rest or address issues related to the death.
- Do lawn work, care for their pets, or help with other chores.
- Invite them over for dinner, dessert, or just to visit.
- Invite them to go for a walk with you.
- Call or send a note. This is especially appreciated a few months later when everyone goes on with their lives and the bereaved is alone with the pain.
- Use the deceased's name in conversations. "Most bereaved people say that they find it hurtful if the deceased is not mentioned, almost as if they had never existed. Remember happy times, things they liked or didn't like, funny things they said. It all helps to keep the memories strong and bring some comfort" (If I Should Die).
- Invite them to social events as you previously did.
- Help the bereaved children with school assignments.
- Purchase a book about grief and give it to the bereaved.
- Collect information about grief resources in the area and share them.

By offering and providing practical help, the bereaved will feel cared for and supported.

References

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