

How to Help Those Who are Grieving - Part 1

Losing a loved one is one of the most painful events in our lives. When deaths occur in our church family, we care deeply, and yet it can be hard knowing what to say or how to help. We may worry we'll "upset" the person who is grieving or bring their emotions to the surface. But our own discomfort can, ironically, cause the grieving person to feel even more alone and sad.

The next two newsletter articles will contain some reminders, based on grief research, which can help members of a church family offer supportive comments and gestures that really help.

You might say, "I'm so sorry you're going through this." Or "This is such a hard time for you and I want you to know I care and am praying for you." Say, "One thing I'll always remember about _____ is _____." Talk about the person who has died. Use his/her name. Sometimes we assume it's hard for the grieving person to talk about their loved one. But, in almost all cases, their biggest fear is that their loved one will be forgotten. Share a brief story about their loved one or mention how much the person meant to you.

Avoid saying things such as "It's for the best," or "He's in a better place," or "It's a blessing." Or "I know just how you feel." Or "You'll get over it." Or "It's God's will." These clichés aren't helpful and often hurt more than heal.

Respect each person's time line for grieving. Don't say, "It's time to move on," or act as if the person is taking too long to "get over it." In reality, we never "get over" the loss of a loved one. We learn to live a different life...and each person needs to grieve in his/her own way. Show patience, kindness and a willingness to really listen.

As we offer compassion to those who are grieving, remember this quote of Henri Nouwen: *The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion; who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing, not healing...that is a friend that cares.*

How to Help Those Who are Grieving - Part 2

Last month, we discussed what to say and what not to say to someone who has lost a loved one. This month we'll review some important information about the grief process that can help us be more compassionate and helpful.

1. Many of us learned the "stages of grief" many years ago. At that time, the stages seemed to fit into neat little compartments...you went through a stage and then entered the next stage. But grief research shows that grieving is a process that is not at all "neat" or predictable. We can seem to be healing and moving forward...and then find ourselves right back at the beginning stages of grief. Often, an anniversary date (a birthday, anniversary) or a holiday or a song, smell, sight will evoke the deepest grief again. This is why we need supportive loved ones around us who will remind us to be "gentle" with ourselves and allow us to grieve in our own way with no judgment or advice.
2. Often, when a friend loses a loved one, we are tempted to ask "How can I help?" But, in fact, it's very difficult for people to identify what they need.
You might try saying: "I'd like to bring a meal...what would be a good time for me to do that?" Be sure to ask about food allergies/intolerances and try to bring something other than lasagna! (I once heard of a widow who had 5 lasagnas in her refrigerator and she didn't even like lasagna!) There are other creative ways to give help (cutting their lawn; shoveling snow; giving rides)
3. Send cards often...maybe every few weeks for several months. The toughest time for those grieving is after the funeral is over and everyone has gone back to their normal routine. Don't disengage with the grieving person. Acknowledge that the process of grieving continues. A phone call just to "listen" is also helpful.
4. If you're aware of a grief support group in your area, you can gently mention it as a resource...don't push or force. Sometimes it's helpful to offer to go with the grieving person to the first couple of meetings.

Earl Grollman writes: "Grief is not a disorder, a disease or sign of weakness. It is an emotional, physical and spiritual necessity, the price you pay for love. The only cure for grief is to grieve."