

Leaving the door open

Quite often, the bereaved person is swept along in the eventful days leading up to the funeral – it may be in the days and weeks afterwards that he or she finds it harder to cope, and your offers of help and company will be most welcome.

People can feel very lonely for a long time after a death, so people ringing or popping in can be very welcome – especially at weekends, when there is likely to be less sense of routine than in the week. By staying in touch, you'll be better able to judge how much support people need or want, and for how long.

Don't feel upset if your offers of help or company are rejected: some people need to feel space or independence at certain times. But do keep reminding them you're there – people's needs change over time, and people have to live with grief and the consequences of bereavement for years.

Remember

You can always ask for advice on what to do, or support for yourself, from people you respect and trust, or from a variety of organisations that you can find at www.goodlifedeathgrief.org.uk

"There's a mountain of paperwork associated with a death and hundreds of jobs to do. The friends who keep on texting to say there is another world beyond probate, and it contains fish and chips, are doing me a great favour."

We think we wouldn't do it but we do

If a friend or acquaintance has been recently bereaved, we start to treat them differently. Sometimes we'll cross to the other side of the street to avoid having to talk to them. Or we'll delay giving them that call. Or we'll put off emailing them again and again. What do you say to someone who's just lost a partner, parent or child? It's so easy to say the wrong thing. And who knows where the conversation might take you if you started, and how long it might go on?

It's just easier to avoid. The problem is that people who have lost a loved often need lots of support - even though it doesn't look that way. And sometimes they need it wherever they can get it - just a word of acknowledgement from a relative stranger can make a difference.

To find out how to get more help visit:
www.goodlifedeathgrief.org.uk
or call 0131 229 0538



Good Life, Good Death, Good Grief is working to make Scotland a place where there is more openness about death, dying and bereavement so that:

- People are aware of ways to live with death, dying and bereavement
- People feel better equipped to support each other through the difficult times that can come with death, dying and bereavement

We are interested to hear from any person or organisation who wants to work with us to make Scotland a place where people can be open about death, dying and bereavement.

This leaflet was originally produced by the Dying Matters Coalition which aims to change public knowledge, attitudes and behaviours towards dying, death and bereavement. Dying Matters is led by the National Council for Palliative Care, the umbrella charity for palliative, end of life and hospice care in England, Wales & Northern Ireland: www.dyingmatters.org
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What to do if someone you know has been bereaved

Showing you care

People who have been bereaved often don't want a long conversation. But they do often appreciate just knowing that you know about the death, or that you care, and that you can provide help if need be. Sometimes they'll find it easier to talk to an acquaintance than a close family member.

Here are some of the things that people who have been bereaved have said about what helps.

"I appreciated the letters people wrote, knowing that people were thinking about me and Susan who had died."

'I wanted people to say they knew what had happened, not avoid it or pretend they didn't know.'

'Sometimes I needed to be busy but other times it was great when people offered to help.'

"The best friends were the ones who slipped immediately into practical mode and said: 'What can I do?' Don't be offended if your help is refused, and keep on offering."

Where to start

- Start from the assumption that it's better to do something than nothing – to acknowledge a loss rather than ignore it.
- Make a phone call, write a letter or send an email. You don't have to say much, or be clever. Making contact is the main thing.
- Think how you might feel under similar circumstances - what you might want from other people. But try to remember that their feelings may be different from your own.
- Accept invitations to talk from the other person. If they seem to want to talk about the person who has died, encourage them, even if it seems to make them upset.
- Listening is more important than talking. You don't have to offer solutions or explanations for anything.
- Don't be offended if your offer to talk is rejected – it may simply be the wrong time.
- Try and create an environment where the person has the freedom to talk or not talk, according to what they want. "I'm around all day if you fancy a chat..."

Conducting the conversation

- Provide your own recollections of the person, which often help the other person get a more rounded picture, and can help them feel more at ease talking to you.
- Words aren't always necessary, or easy. Some people can't explain the inexplicable. Sometimes it helps just to be with somebody, especially if they don't seem to want to talk.
- Try not to dominate the conversation, and don't push them to talk if they don't want to.

Help with practicalities

Most people who have experienced bereavement say how much they have appreciated offers of practical help. When someone has died, there are a lot of jobs to be done.

In the days and weeks afterwards, there are dozens of people to contact: relatives, friends, employers, colleagues, solicitor, accountant, mortgage company, pensions company, tax office, bank, utilities, passport office, social services, benefits office, clubs, associations.

These are jobs that a bereaved person might well want to do themselves, or with members of their family. But they really appreciate it if friends are on hand to help them out while they are doing these jobs – by providing a meal, for example, or doing some shopping, or looking after the children for a few hours.

People usually find it easier to accept offers of help if you suggest specific tasks. Rather than saying: "Let me know if there's anything I can do", you could offer to phone people you know, sort out the flowers, or drive them to the places they need to go. But make sure you deliver on any promises to help.

Getting the balance right

No two people are alike in their emotional or practical needs after a death. Sometimes people who have been bereaved feel a need to perform many tasks, or perform certain tasks well, to help them come to terms with what has happened. Others would prefer to leave practicalities to others.

Try...

... saying "I was sorry to hear about..."

... saying "I've been thinking of you"

... saying what you really feel about the death

... talking about normal life as well.

... being honest: "I didn't know your wife, but I wish I had" (if you mean it)

... remembering anniversaries – the day the person died, their birthday etc.

... giving flowers

... treating them the way you always have

Don't...

... say things that you assume, but don't know to be true. "I know you were very close to your mum" could be upsetting if the person feels guilty that she was too distant.

... stop inviting them to social events, just because they are no longer a couple, or because you think they might be miserable

... come out with clichés – "I know how you feel" or "Time is a great healer". The problem with clichés is that, even if the sentiment is genuine, it doesn't sound it.

... make a judgement on when they will be able to "move on": everyone grieves at their own pace.