

Being With Bereaved Parents

The friends and relatives who offered help and support immediately after the child's death often drift away and grieving parents may be left feeling isolated and unsupported. Yet while they need to talk about the way they feel about the child they have lost, other people in their lives often feel embarrassed to talk of the dead. They change the subject or start to avoid the parents altogether. The following "Do's and Don'ts" (adapted from The Compassionate Friends' Newsletter) may help some families communicate their needs to others.

DO:

- be aware that each person's style of grieving will be unique
 - let your concern and caring show
 - listen and hear what is being said using a reflective, open and natural listening style
 - be aware that silences can be helpful. You don't have to say something as soon as the other person has finished talking. You don't have to fill up the silences; they give time for reflection. Take time to think about what has been said and the feelings implied before you reply.
 - allow them to express as much grief as they are feeling at the moment and are willing to share. Allow powerful feelings to be expressed without being critical or making the person feel they have to justify their feelings. Deep sobbing, shouting or physical expressions of anger should not be restricted as long as this is done in a safe way. Your touch can convey a great deal of comfort and acceptance when the initial burst of energy has subsided
 - allow the griever time to grieve. Encourage them to be patient with themselves and not to expect too much
 - allow them to talk about the child they have lost as much and as often as they want to. The parent may want to tell the same story many times over. Remember that this is an important part in the process of adjustment towards a memory of the relationship with the person who has died
 - talk about the special qualities of that child. Use their child's name in your conversations with them. You may be the only person who is able to do this and it can mean so much to them
 - remember that many who gave support during the child's illness and immediately after the child's death are no longer available
 - recognize the intensity of grief that will be experienced at certain significant times and leading up to these days i.e., special occasions such as birthdays, anniversaries, Christmas etc.
 - acknowledge anger. This anger may be expressed toward you, but try not to feel that it is directed at you personally. The person may be feeling angry toward a range of people and situations.
 - acknowledge guilt. There may be guilt for not being able to protect their child.
 - express your own feelings, but be aware that you support and listen to the bereaved person.
- (cont.)
- realise that you don't have to 'fix' it, or cheer up the person who is grieving. Rather, you need to have the courage to stay and listen.
 - be yourself. Don't put on a false front. Your genuineness can be a model, which can influence the bereaved family's way of communicating their grief with more honesty and openness.
 - acknowledge and normalize the feelings that bereaved people often fear that they are going crazy and normalize these feelings.

DON'T:

- avoid them because you are uncomfortable, (being avoided by friends adds pain to an already intolerably painful experience)
- say you know how they feel
- tell them what they should feel or do - like saying 'You ought to be feeling better now' or 'You must pull yourself together.'
- make hard and fast rules about grieving and force a pattern of grief on them
- avoid mentioning their child's name because you are scared to remind them of their pain (they won't have forgotten it)
- prevent the person from expressing their grief or anger if they need to
- try to find something positive about the death (e.g. closer ties with the rest of the family, or a moral lesson)
- suggest they can have another child (it wouldn't replace the one they've lost)
- say it's good they've still got other children (children are not interchangeable)
- make any comments which in any way suggest that the care given to their child at home, in hospital or wherever was inadequate (parents are plagued by feelings of doubt and guilt without any help from their family or friends)
- Let your own sense of helplessness keep you from reaching out to a bereaved family