

Providing grief support

Recognising grief

There is no one way that all people experience grief. No two people experience the loss of someone they love in the same way. The experience of grieving can affect a person in many ways; emotionally, physically, intellectually and spiritually.

Emotionally

It's normal for people to feel many different emotions when grieving: Sadness, anger, guilt, anxiety, fatigue, loneliness, helplessness, shock, yearning, and numbness are some common feelings.

Physically

Grief can affect people in many physical ways; weakness, empty stomach, tightness in the chest, dry mouth, lack of energy, hypersensitivity to noise, sense of un-reality, sleeplessness, social withdrawal, dreams, restlessness, hyperactivity, crying, sobbing, treasuring objects.

Intellectually

The way that we think can be affected by grief; disbelief, confusion, pre-occupation, a sense of a presence, or hallucinations.

Spiritually

The experience of grief can affect our faith; confusion, feeling distant from God, difficulty praying, questioning spiritual beliefs and feeling betrayed, abandoned, or angry with God.

All of these ways of experiencing grief are normal as people search to make meaning of the loss of someone they love.

Centre for Life, Marriage & Family

An agency of the Catholic
Archdiocese of Perth

How to listen to grief

It can be difficult to know how to listen to someone who is grieving. We want to help, but inside we may feel unsure about the right thing to say:

- Don't let fears about saying or doing the wrong thing stop you from reaching out.
- Ask, "how are you feeling today?" Each day can be different for someone who is grieving; take the time to listen and understand what they are going through.
- Be gentle; expect that they will have up and down days.
- Listen to them if they want to open up to you, and try to suspend all judgement.
- Everyone grieves differently and for different lengths of time. It isn't something you can 'fix' – it's something that will be integrated into life experience with time.
- Concentrate your efforts on listening carefully and with compassion.
- If they don't feel like talking, don't push them. Sometimes just being there is comforting. Sitting together in silence can be helpful too.
- Ask them how you can help or what they need.
- Talk about everyday life, too. Their loss and grief does not have to be the focus of all your conversations.
- Respect their need for space but keep in contact over time; keep checking in after the initial shock wears off. Maintain your support after the funeral.
- Don't forget the power of human touch. Holding the person's hand or giving them a hug can be helpful, but make sure you check that it's okay with them first.
- Don't be afraid to mention the deceased. Although it may prompt tears, it won't make your friend any sadder.
- Losing someone we love can have a powerful effect on our faith and relationship with God. Sometimes it can be difficult to pray. Mary and Jesus also knew a lot about losing someone they love. It can help to offer to pray with or for the person who is grieving. Don't pressure someone to pray if they would rather not.

Provide practical help too

You can also show the grieving person that you care by offering practical help, such as:

- Do some of their housework.
- Answer the telephone for them.
- Bring over pre-cooked meals that only need to be reheated.
- Take over some of their regular duties, such as picking up the children from school.
- Understand and respect they may not want you to support them in this way.

Additional things that can help, include:

- Honour and celebrate the life of the deceased by encouraging them to talk and share memories and photos. There was so much more to their loved one's life than how they died.
- Suggest they keep a journal to record thoughts, feelings, and memories. It's okay if this brings tears. Suggest they also think about things that bring a smile to them about that person. It's okay to recall memories of joy.
- Help them to find a way to say goodbye that expresses their love. For example:
 - plant a tree in their memory;
 - write them a letter; or,
 - write a poem about them.

Some things that typically don't help:

Sometimes we mean well but accidentally do or say things that don't help such as:

- telling them about your grief experiences instead of listening to theirs;
- comparing their grief with yours or anyone else's;
- telling them they're grieving in the 'wrong' way;
- giving them unsolicited advice about how they can best get over their grief;
- reasoning with them about how they should or shouldn't feel.
- Saying, "everything happens for a reason," or "this is God's plan."

Two special types of grief

Suicide Bereavement

Three main themes are common for people experiencing with suicide bereavement: Why did they do it? How could I have prevented it? How could they do this to me? Sometimes these questions can invoke a feeling of guilt or shame. Often the experience of losing a loved one through suicide is accompanied by trauma because it is so sudden.

Ambiguous Grief

People experience ambiguous grief when there is a lack of closure or understanding. This kind of bereavement leaves a person searching for answers, and can complicate the process of grieving. It can be harder to cope or move on to acceptance from this type of grief. It will take more time for those who are grieving this way as they try to make sense of their experience.

With these kinds of grief it is important to be compassionate, listen, and be patient; allow the person to talk naturally about the situation and let them know it's natural to be feeling the way they are.

Your Self-care

It can be very difficult listening to others experience of grief. It's important, if you want to help others, that you also manage your own self-care.

Make sure that you keep doing things that bring you happiness and joy, and that you talk to people you trust and who care about you.

Sometimes people need more professional support

Although grief can be very painful, most people (85 to 90 per cent) find that with the support of their family and friends and their own resources, they gradually find ways to cope, and do not need to seek professional help.

However, sometimes the circumstance of the death may have been particularly distressing, such as a traumatic, sudden or unexpected death, or there may be circumstances that make the grief particularly acute or complicated. Consider suggesting your friend or relative seeks professional help if, over time, they seem to be struggling to manage their day-to-day life. The Archdiocese provides a service to assist people in finding the right kind of professional help.

You can ring 0418 916 973 for more information.

“May we, with Christ-like tenderness and compassion, know how to be close and offer consolation to families suffering the loss of a loved one.”

- Pope Francis