

info sheet

Bereavement: when a loved one dies

People experience the pain of grief with a variety of emotional responses which include shock (“It can’t be true”), denial (“The tests were wrong”), anger (“Why did she get sick and not someone else?”), guilt (“Why did I smoke [or drink alcohol] during my pregnancy?”), fear (“Will my other children die, too?”), exhaustion, depression, confusion, and bargaining (“If only we could have a miracle”). These are just a few of the myriad of emotions people in grief experience. It is also important to understand that people experience these emotions in a roller-coaster fashion: sometimes feeling up and hopeful, other days feeling deeply depressed, other days coasting along and feeling virtually no emotion. All of these emotions are a normal part of the grief and mourning process.

It is important when working with anyone who is grieving to do the following:

- **Acknowledge the family’s grief.** Label their experience as one of grief. Let them know they have a right to have their feelings.
- **Be there.** One’s presence can be the greatest gift given to a grieving individual. Sometimes holding someone’s hand, offering a hug, or just acknowledging, “This must be so hard for you,” can be enough to support someone in the grief process.
- **Listen.** Grieving people need to share their pain with another person who will not judge them or give them advice and suggestions. Listening to someone tell their story over and over can often be an invaluable gift to them in helping them sort through their feelings and release their pain.

- **Offer “permission to grieve.”** Teach grieving families that it is important to express the emotions of grief, but that there are ways to express pain that are more healing than others. For example, an angry parent can learn to express their anger through physical activity such as yard work, tearing up old phone books, writing letters, or screaming in a pillow. The key is to help grieving people find constructive ways to release their feelings of grief rather than to take it out on others or themselves.
- **Develop and encourage support groups.** Support groups give families a chance to share their pain with others experiencing loss.
- **Encourage children to participate in all of the above suggestions.** Children love, therefore they grieve. By teaching children how to deal with the pain of loss early in life, we can teach them how to grieve the losses that are an inevitable part of their future lives, losses such as moving, divorce, the break-up of a relationship, or the death of a friend, loved one, or pet. Children can draw pictures or write letters to an ill sibling as a way to express their love and concern.¹
- **Talk about the deceased.** Discuss anything you know about them, such as what they said or did. It helps the grieving persons to keep them closer.
- **Call often,** especially after the first couple months. Their energy level may be too low for them to make the effort even though they may need to talk.
- **Send cards even weeks after the funeral.** They are always helpful, and there is a disappointment when they finally quit coming.

- **If you want to do something with or for the bereaved, give him or her an option.** Some days they just can't cope with "something to do."
- **Don't avoid the person when you see them for the first time after the funeral.** Go up to them first.
- **Try not to look startled when the bereaved mentions the deceased.** Let him or her talk about the deceased loved one as much as they like.
- **Don't talk about what the deceased might have been spared by death.** Those thoughts bring no comfort.
- **Things you could do to be helpful:** grocery shop, go to the library, harvest garden, mow lawn, prepare hot meal, babysit, or clean house.
- **If they have children, invite them to spend time with your children.** For example, if the children have lost their father, it would be wonderful if another man would spend some time with them. He could include them occasionally when he does something with his own kids.²

¹ Source: Reprinted from the ARCH National Resource Center. Author Kathleen Braza, M.A. is a bereavement consultant and national speaker on issues of grief and loss in adults and children. She is Adjunct Clinical Faculty at the University of Utah teaching courses in death, dying, and bereavement.

² Source: Rivendell Resources and Cendra Lynn, Ph.D., PO Box 3272, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 48106; by phone at 734-761-1960 or e-mail griefnet@rivendell.org or griefnet@ic.net.

This material is not intended to replace the advice of a qualified attorney, tax adviser, investment professional, or insurance agent. Before making any financial commitment regarding the issues discussed here, consult with the appropriate professional consultant.

For further information

Grief Resources at

<http://www.concentric.net/~Lismith/GRIEF.HTM> offers reading lists on a wide range of grief-related topics.

GriefNet at <http://rivendell.org/> offers resources on support groups, survivor information directories, and book lists.

Rando, Therese. **How To Go On Living When Someone You Love Dies.** Massachusetts: Lexington Books, 1988.

Veninga, Robert. **A Gift of Hope: How We Survive Our Tragedies.** New York: Little, Brown and Co., 1985.

Kathleen Braza, M.A., **Bereavement Consultant, Healing Resources**, P.O. Box 9478, Salt Lake City, Utah, 84109. 1-800-473-HEAL.

Center for Loss and Life Transition, 3735 Broken Bow Road, Fort Collins, Colorado, 80526. (303)-226-6050

Association for Death Education and Counseling, 638 Prospect Ave., Hartford, Connecticut 06105-4298. (202)-232-4825.

The Dougy Center for Grieving Children, 3909 S.E. 52nd Ave., Portland, Oregon 97206. (503)-775-5683.

Contact your investment professional for more information or to construct a personalized Heritage Planning Profile to help your parents, your children, or yourself.