

## Bereaved Families of Cape Breton

### Cardinal Rules of Grief Support

Supporting a person who has experienced the death of a loved one is an extremely difficult task. As much as you care about the person, you often do not know what is the right thing to do or say. Since everyone goes through the grief process in an individual way, no matter how similar the death may have been to one you experienced, the individuality of the griever and their relationship with the deceased is unique. Consequently, the person offering support may become uncomfortable or frustrated because all their seemingly best efforts do not make the griever happy; and the griever may be resentful because those people who they most depended on are not there for them. It must be understood that the person in grief may not know or be able to express what they need; they only are aware of what is not helpful.

The real grief process often does not start until months after the death. Usually this occurs when the griever has finished all the legal tasks and the friends and family have resumed their normal life style. The unfortunate conundrum is that during that initial period, the griever appears to be functioning well because they are still in shock. All outward appearances lead to support people and the griever to believe that, if they can function this well immediately after the death, they will certainly function even better after more time. More likely, the opposite is true. The support system stops asking how the griever is doing, stops talking about the death or deceased, and dedicates less time to the griever. The gradual wearing off of shock occurs simultaneously, and it is not until the necessary tasks are completed, the friends and family have gone back to their own life, and the reality of the death begins to set in, that the real grief erupts.

There are always ways to be supportive during the grief process, acknowledging that the grief process has no defined course or time line. It is imperative to remember that people who are in grief that you care about, do not only need your support immediately after the death, but months later. It is an awesome commitment, but a highly rewarding one when you know you can make a difference.

The following suggestions are based on the stories of thousands of people in grief. This is essentially their anonymous request for assistance during the devastating time.

#### **Silence**

This is the hardest requirement we may face and also the most effective. We need to listen to the griever and let them cry and tell their story as many times as they need to do so. We do not have to find the right words because there are no words to solve the unsolvable. There is nothing you can do to make the pain go away. You cannot fix it; all you can do is share it.

#### **Admit Our Helplessness**

There is nothing we can do to change the event. There is no way we can control the grief response. There is no magic we can perform to remove the grief instantly. Our society is based on fixing things that are broken. When a person grieves, we describe them as “falling apart,” “breaking down,” “going to pieces,” “losing it,” “decompensating.” All these terms connote something breaking, so our automatic response is to try to repair it. So we desperately try to find the words, the activities, the rational, the answer to the unknown, to fix the griever. The only

way we can “fix” them is to resurrect the deceased in a healthy state and that is not possible.

## **Be Genuine**

The safest way to respond to a person in grief is to be natural and genuine. You are no different than the person you were before the death, so insincere or incongruous behaviour will be obvious. Again, we are trying to find the cure for this pain, and trying to appear cheery to avoid the reality of the death is destructive. Non-genuine support is worse than no support. Take your cues from the griever.

## **Be With the Person in Grief**

A person can be right next to the person in grief and not be with them. Being with a person means physically being with them whether they are crying, talking, silent or in another room. It means meeting their needs and asking what they are. It means respecting their choices; to be alone, to just sit. It does not mean finding ways to distract them from the death; it does not mean changing the subject when they mention the deceased; it does not mean telling them what is “good” for them. It does not mean trying to hide your own pain or tears over the loss; it does not mean being “strong,” if that means not showing emotion; strength is really found in the courage to grieve. It is difficult to want to ease someone’s pain and know that the best you can do is to be there; it is difficult to hurt for someone in pain and now know if what you are offering is really helpful. And, it may not be until months later, that you know that you made a difference. Ideally, you will know you made a difference whether the person in grief is able to tell you or not.

## **Do Not Judge Another’s Grief**

No one’s grief will look the same. Each person had their own unique relationship with the deceased; their own personality and coping skills; their own culture, tradition and history. Therefore, do not compare the griever to yourself or anyone else who has experienced the same type of death. They may look alike; they may look completely different. However, the way they process their grief is most often normal; do not assume it is abnormal if it does not meet some erroneous criteria. It is also important that your expectations of how a person “should” grieve, or how you would imagine you would respond, will fit those of anyone else.

## **Be Clear About Your Own Issues on Death**

If you are uncomfortable with the reality of death, that discomfort will show through no matter how much you try to couch it in words or actions. It really is more helpful to admit your helplessness, your own fears, and ask how you can help the griever. The death of a loved one is not an experience any one of us want to experience, but ultimately, we all will. Being with someone who has recently experienced the unthinkable may be extremely difficult for you. Recognize this and find other ways to be supportive if you wish. Some deaths are harder to process: the sudden, violent and/or accidental death, the death of a peer, sibling, or someone our own age, the death of a child, or a death due to suicide or homicide. These are harder to integrate and although we intellectually realize we can never explain why the death happened, we may work harder to somehow put meaning to the death. Again, it is our helplessness and lack of control that emerges. We also become aware of the reality of death in these circumstances. If death can happen to someone who looks just like ourselves, for no reason, how can we be sure it will not happen to us?

## **Know Your Limitations**

Be as supportive as you can comfortably be. If you are uncomfortable being present with a person in grief, perhaps you can write and explain that, still acknowledging your care. Running away from death and grief will only suffice for so long; it is a part of all of our lives. And, it is no less painful to avoid it than it is to confront it.

## **Cardinal Rules**

Some people will try to be supportive of the person in grief by sharing all their own stories of loss and grief. Again, they are talking because it may be too painful to listen; and, perhaps using the person in grief as a way to resolve their own pain. If you are aware of this happening, recognize that you may have your own grief issues to work on.

No one's pain is any greater than the one they personally feel. Do not try to diminish the pain of the griever by listing other stories that could be worse or more tragic. No one else's story matters to the person in grief. By trying to diminish the pain they feel you are, in fact, curtailing their permission to openly grieve in your presence. Ultimately, that will change the relationship because the griever and yourself will no longer be comfortable knowing that the one thing on the griever's mind, "the deceased," is the one subject that is prohibited.

## **The Best We Can Do Is Offer Nonjudgemental, Compassionate Support**

We do not need to provide solutions; only the permission and opportunity to grieve. We do not need to save them; we need to support them. Do what they need; we cannot presume what that is. Only they are in this place and only they can reach their own peace. Do not pity them. They do not want your pity; that only makes them feel less than you, inadequate without their loved one. We cannot fix them, but we can give them permission to fix themselves. It is a slow heal, at their speed, not ours. Open your arms to them and share their grief. You will know you have made a difference.

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