

HELPING THE BEREAVED

Many people find coping with bereaved family and friends an awkward and difficult time. Everyone knows the stories of people who would rather cross the street than face what they feel would be a potentially embarrassing conversation with someone who has been recently bereaved.

Make Contact

It is very important to make contact as soon as possible. Contact the bereaved person immediately to tell them how sorry you are to hear of their loss. Send a letter or card and flowers if appropriate. Most bereaved people say that reading the letters and cards they receive provides valuable support and comfort, particularly during the many sleepless nights they endure. You may worry that your words seem rather banal or trite, but they often take on a deeper significance and offer a degree of consolation in the heightened emotions of bereavement. If you know of any words that have particularly touched you, then please let us know via our email.

Maintain Contact

Keep the contact going with visits, phone calls and letters, particularly as the weeks and months pass by. Often levels of support can fall away in the months after bereavement, but this is the time when the bereaved can be the loneliest and most vulnerable. Six months is recognised as being a particularly vulnerable time, as it is about this time that the reality of the loss hits home and yet others are assuming that by this stage, people are over the worst. Continue to invite them to events and functions that you would have previously. They can always say no, but don't make that assumption yourself.

Listen And Let The Bereaved Person Talk

Talking is recognised as one of the most important elements in the grieving and healing process. Let the bereaved person talk about the person who has died and don't be embarrassed by their tears and anger. Don't use platitudes - Kate Boydell in her excellent website www.merrywidow.me.uk says, "People use platitudes as a replacement for personal experiences, substituting insensitivity for insight. If in doubt, don't say it."

Talk About The Person Who Has Died

Many people feel that they shouldn't talk about the person that has died as this will bring on another wave of grief. However most bereaved people say that they find it hurtful if the deceased is not mentioned, almost as if they had never existed. Remember happy times, things they liked or didn't like, funny things they said. It all helps to keep the memories strong and bring some comfort.

Offer Practical Help

Consider what practical support you can offer, such as taking a cooked meal, taking care of the children, shopping or helping with any funeral arrangements. Try and maintain regular help for as long as needed or possible but try not to make promises that you will be able to keep. Don't say "Give me a call if you need anything", help needs to be freely given without the bereaved person having to ask for it - make regular contact and make a date to have the bereaved person/family around for a coffee, Sunday lunch, take the children out, make an

extra cake/casserole and drop it round. Muslim tradition requires that mourners do not cook for themselves for 40 days after a death - relatives and neighbours supply the food.

Be Aware Of Significant Dates And Anniversaries

Family times such as Christmas and birthdays as well as anniversaries of the death are a particularly difficult and traumatic time for the bereaved and need to be treated with sensitivity, particularly the first few times they come around.

Helping Children

Once adults tried to shield children from death, but modern day understanding is that avoidance is a recipe for disaster - especially for a child. Like all of us, children need to understand that death is a natural part of life, just as birth is and two charities in particular are very able to help children, parents and families through the grieving process with professional carers, helpful publications and activities. Contact The Child Bereavement Trust and Winston's Wish - see charities page. *Widowhood - A Young Woman's Survival Guide* can be found on Kate Boydell's wonderful website - www.merrywidow.me.uk. Kate was widowed at the age of 33 with two young children and her personal experience offers a highly practical, painfully poignant and at times, amusing insight into the emotions and experiences of widowhood, from telling her children the news, to coping with DIY. This is a valuable resource for everyone and is equally useful for those trying to help and understand bereaved family and friends.