

I have heard people say, "I wouldn't go to one of those grief meetings. It's morbid – people sitting around talking about the dead." How wrong those people are!

Certainly there are tears and certainly we talk about loved ones who are dead, but going to a Compassionate Friends meeting is far from morbid.

In so many ways, those who attend are saying, "I am hurting now, but I want to go on with life." They are saying, "I am crying now, but I want to laugh again." They are saying, "I am sick in body and soul, help me get well." I see these things as healthy, not morbid.

It is not easy to walk into a meeting of any kind alone, especially one where the subject is very emotional, but once there it takes only a few minutes to find out we are not alone; that there are those who care about us and want to help us. We see others hurting and suddenly we want to help them. I don't see that as morbid.

A grieving parent wants to talk about his beloved child who is no longer physically a part of his life. That child has died with a tragic suddenness or as the result of an illness that usually takes older people. We want to know why or to find a reason or some meaning in our child's death. I don't see morbidity in trying to understand.

Memories of our child are all we have left. We have a driving need to hang on to these memories lest we lose that small bit of our child. It is not morbid to want to keep that small part alive forever, at least in our hearts and minds.

As bereaved parents we cry at meetings. The reality that our child is dead hurts. When we hurt we cry. Tears wash the soul. It is as necessary to cry as it is to eat. As Boves says: "Tearless grief bleeds inwardly." I don't see it as morbid that we do what is necessary to heal the gaping wound in our hearts.

Yes, there is sadness and tears and the retelling of painful stories at a Compassionate Friends meeting, but there are also smiles. There are the smiles that come from the telling of funny things our child did before he died. There are smiles in the feeling of relief at the knowledge that we are not the only one who has felt a certain way. There are smiles that tell we came through the first anniversary of our child's death without the unbearable misery we expected. There are smiles when the small glimmer begins that we will not always be this tormented. There are the smiles that say to another, "I care about you."

To walk into a Compassionate Friends meeting is a loud shout..."I want to live and be happy again." It is a cry that "My child is dead, but I know he would want me to go on and be a better person for the suffering." It is a confirmation that, "Even though part of my life is gone, there is a reason to go on." There is nothing morbid about doing what is necessary in order to re-enter the mainstream of life.

Grief, with its many ups and downs, lasts far longer than society in general recognizes. Be patient with yourself.

Each person's grief is individual. You and your spouse will experience it and cope with it differently.

Crying is an acceptable and healthy expression of grief and releases built-up tension for mothers, fathers, brothers and sisters. Cry freely as you feel the need.

Physical reactions to the death of a child may include loss of appetite or overeating, sleeplessness, and sexual difficulties. Parents may find that they have very little energy and cannot concentrate. A balanced diet, rest, and moderate exercise are especially important for the whole family at this time.

Avoid the use of drugs and alcohol. Medication should be taken sparingly and only under the supervision of your physician. Many substances are addictive and can lead to a chemical dependence. In addition they may stop or delay the necessary grieving process.

Friends and relatives may be uncomfortable around you. They want to ease your pain but do not know how. Take the initiative and help them learn how to be supportive to you. Talk about your child so they know this is appropriate.

Whenever possible, put off major decisions (changing residence, changing job, etc.) for at least a year.

Avoid making hasty decisions about your child's belongings. Do not allow others to take over or to rush you. You can do it little by little whenever you feel ready.

Parents may feel they have nothing to live for and may think about a release from this intensive pain. Be assured that many parents feel this way but that a sense of purpose and meaning does return. The pain does lessen.

Guilt, real or imagined, is a normal part of grief. It surfaces in thoughts and feelings of "if only". In order to resolve this guilt, learn to express and share these feelings and learn to forgive yourself.

Anger is another common reaction to loss. Anger, like guilt, needs to be expressed and shared in a healthy, acceptable manner.

Children are often the forgotten grievers within a family. They are experiencing many of the same emotions you are, so share thoughts and tears with them. Though it is a painful time, be sure they feel loved and included.

Holidays and the anniversaries of your child's birth and death can be stressful times. Consider the feelings of the entire family in planning how to spend the day. Allow time and space for your own emotional needs.

A child's death often causes a parent to challenge and examine his faith or philosophy of life. Don't be disturbed if you are questioning old beliefs. Talk about it. For many, faith offers help to accept the unacceptable.

It helps to become involved with a group of parents having similar experiences; sharing eases loneliness and promotes the expression of your grief in an atmosphere of acceptance and understanding.

#### BEREAVED PARENTS AND THEIR FAMILIES CAN FIND HEALING AND HOPE FOR THE FUTURE AS THEY REORGANIZE THEIR LIVES IN A POSITIVE WAY.

While there will never be a formula on effective communication with grieving parents, there appears to be some communication which can help restore peace of mind, and other communication which contributes more to the grief. We hope the following observations gleaned from comments made by parents as well as several books on the topic will be of help to us all in being more helpful and supportive to bereaved parents and others in grief.

Do make a condolence call to offer sympathy and help. Although you may feel awkward and uncomfortable, it is a simple and straightforward act of humanity. It demonstrates one's concern and reassures the mourners that they are not as alone in their grief as they may feel. Generally you needn't stay long – 10 to 15 minutes at most. But be prepared to stay longer if the bereaved parent seems reluctant to be alone. Be ready to just be with the bereaved parent. Conversely, be prepared to leave without looking hurt if that is what seems wanted. Take your cue from what the parent seems to want.

Try to avoid offering trite and overconfident advice and clichés. If you feel awkward and don't know what to say (and clichés are often offered for this reason), simply say "I'm sorry" or "I want you to know I care". Do not say: "I know how you feel" unless you have had a child die also. Grieving parents do not expect you to have all the answers or to take away their hurt. But they deeply appreciate your showing that you care. You don't have to fix everything.

Do not be afraid to reach out and touch. A hug or squeeze of the hand can mean more than a hundred ill-chosen words. It can say: "I'm your friend. I want to help if I can."

Don't say: "If there is anything I can do to help, just let me know." Offer with specifics. Be more definite: make practical suggestions. You may be able to help by breaking the news to others, answering the telephone, greeting visitors, providing food, keeping lists of those who have brought food or called so their kindness can be acknowledged later.

Don't always wait for the person in grief to make the first move. Don't say: "Call me and we'll get together." Grieving is a low energy level which may be too low to make the effort to call even though they may have the need to talk. Realize that although they may seem to be "doing so well" they have a lot of grief to work through.

Call and offer a specific date to do something with you or give a choice of times. Try to think of when the bereaved person's "down times" may be and offer support then. Call often. As much as a grieving person may need and appreciate help, it can be very difficult to bring oneself to ask for it and the bereaved shouldn't have to beg. They may not want to be with others often at first, but it helps to know they can be. A "come anytime" invitation must be preceded by many specific ones or the bereaved person won't feel free to follow up on it.

If he had lived, he may have been a dope head (caught measles, polio, etc.)

Avoid “at least” statements (e.g. At least you have other children...at least you have each other...at least he/she is no longer in pain) or suggesting that the parents can have another child. Such statements add to the parent’s pain because they suggest the pain can be somewhat minimized and do not deal with their feelings about the loss and pain of separation.

Allow, help and encourage the expression of the emotions that the bereaved feel (which may include sadness, depression, guilt, anger, relief, etc.). Expressing and talking through these feelings help the mourner’s system. Be non-judgmental. Don’t tell a grieving person not to feel depressed, or guilty or angry. These comments only serve to drive them to bottle up their feelings more. Encourage them to get their feelings out. Comments that show you’re trying to understand how the bereaved person feels are deeply appreciated. (e.g. “Yes, that must have been frustrating. I’d be angry, too.”)

Don’t say: “It was God’s will.” Such a comment sounds very glib, especially when quoted by those who haven’t experienced much tragedy in their lives. The suggestion that a child’s death was God’s will provokes in many parents feelings of anger and bitterness toward God, feelings that they are being punished, or a belief that God deliberately took their child away. Usually such comments are made because an answer to “Why?” is being sought. It’s better to admit that there are some questions to which we may not have answers in this life. A more helpful approach would be to lead the grieving person to an honest discussion of the fears and feelings with which they are to come to grips; feelings about God, their sense of loss, their groping for a reason to live, accepting help, the pain of letting go. It is usually more appropriate to relate to their feelings of pain and helplessness than to jump in glibly with expressions of hope or blissful acceptance of “God’s will.” As Father Ken Czillinger comments in the article “How to Help the Dying and Grieving”: “Death’s sharpest sting is adjusting to the knowledge that we will never again see our loved one here on earth. Christian belief in life after death brings peace and consolation but it does not completely remove the agony of separation. There is no smooth transition from earthly life to the Resurrection. Holidays, family portraits, empty chairs and rooms, and many other things stir up feelings of emptiness, loneliness and loss...” As Father Czillinger suggests it is very important to “be careful of incorporating too much Easter-hope language when the bereaved are overwhelmed by the sadness of Good Friday.”

A little girl came home from a neighbor’s house where her little friend had died.

“Why did you go?” questioned her father.

“To comfort her mother,” said the child.

“What could you do to comfort her?”

“I climbed into her lap and cried with her.”

--Anonymous

It often helps the parent to listen to others speak of how much they loved or how much they miss the child who has died. Talking about the child who has died facilitates the awareness that it happened, which is an important first step. Allow the parents to talk about their child. Don’t act as though the child never existed. Don’t avoid his/her name. It may help the parents to deal with the reality of death if he/she shares memories of the child with friends. If you find yourselves crying together, that’s alright. Crying together is better than avoiding the emotions. Showing grief is normal and healthy. Sharing tears can be a healing experience for it shows you truly care. If they want to recall good memories of the child you may be able to join in this recollection. Often you will be most helpful by simply listening.

Don't request medication to calm her down, take his pain away, etc. In the opinion of many doctors, this is counterproductive to working through grief. The normal expression of feelings at this time is not an illness and does not need to be treated. Medication is not usually needed or helpful. It is not useful to try to postpone the emotional turmoil. The bereaved need to work through grief, not postpone it.

Help to combat the myth that big boys don't cry. From early on, most boys in America are taught either to hide their stress or to handle it themselves. As men, they therefore consider it unmanly to break down and really express the depths of their pain. We could make a major contribution to family life if we helped change the American image of what it means to be a man. Men who learn to share their grief frequently grow in their relationships with themselves, with others and with God.

Don't suggest that a parent try to forget his/her child or remove all traces of the child. This is the poorest advice possible to give right after death. The bereaved need time to grieve and must be allowed this time. Do not expect a grieving parent to be "over it" in a few weeks or months. There is no timetable for mourning. We have loved profoundly, therefore, we grieve. Remember that the grief process will vary in intensity and length with various people. Some people are able to work through their loss in a constructive way in several months while others will grieve for years. Some are able to verbalize their thoughts and feelings, others internalize and find it difficult to talk about or express their feelings and ideas. Accept parents where they are and be supportive of them even though their grief work may be different from what you have experienced.

Spread your offer of help and encouragement over the days to come. Be available on a regular basis. Don't go to the funeral and then disappear. Keep the contact up, especially around the first anniversary of the death, or the holidays. As Dr. Rosecrans suggested when he speaking to us last year, "Be a friend you can't run off." Friends and relatives can do much to help. Through their sympathy and caring, along with their understanding of the grieving process, they can better know what to say and perhaps even more important, know what NOT to say at a time when parents truly need a friend who knows.

How can we as grieving parents help each other? By respecting individual differences in the way we handle and cope with our grief. The important thing to remember is not to be too quick to judge simply because someone's grief work is different from ours. It is important not to write each other off. Our grief work and ways of coping may differ. Although we may find one person's answer to a problem or suggestion not valid for us, the same person may later say something right on target for us. Remember that there are many ways in which to grieve and no single right way. Be willing to listen and to share. We may share differences in ways of coping but we try to be accepting of these differences. Finally, it is vital to be patient with ourselves and with each other.