

## WHAT TO SAY TO SOMEONE WHO HAS LOST A LOVED ONE

Hospice Nurses continue to care for the loved ones of someone who dies for a year after the death. One of the common things we talk about with people during these bereavement visits and phone calls is how to fit back into the world. It is hard to go to the grocery store and talk to people about your loved one's death. It is hard to go to church and listen to condolences from people. It is also hard for people to approach someone who has experienced the death of a loved one and know what to say. These issues are compounded in our small community when you usually run into someone you know when you are out in public.

One way for a grieving person to manage this uncomfortable situation is to stay home and avoid people when in public. This can work for awhile and the privacy allows time to be sad and regroup. Eventually contact with others in the community will occur and there are some things that can be done to make the encounters more pleasant.

When we see someone who has had a death in their lives we may wonder if we should say anything. It may be hard to acknowledge the death, but it can be even harder to pretend it didn't happen, so say something. One of the most dreaded exchanges for a grieving person is "How are you?" They are terrible, they may wish they were the one that died, they may have so many unresolved issues they wish they could die, and the standard answer of "Fine" is almost impossible to say. Sometimes just the question can elicit a flood of tears and most people do not enjoy crying or being around anyone who is crying in front of the Post Office. It is better to say something like "I have been thinking of you," or "I hope you are having some good moments in your days," or "Know we care about you and your family." These comments acknowledge the hard times without requiring too much of a response. The bereaved person can say "Thank you" and the conversation can end if desired. Concern has been communicated and that is all that may be needed in this public moment.

Another frequent thing we say to someone who has experienced a loss is "If there is anything I can do for you, just let me know." When the call comes asking for help it may not be possible and everyone is disappointed and upset. It would be better to offer specific help you know you can do such as "Can I bring a dessert over next week?" or "We would be glad to help you mow your lawn this summer," or "If you need help I would be glad to find someone to assist you." In this way you will be able to carry out your offer and not create yet another loss for the grieving person.

Sometimes you want to talk further with someone about their loss and offer to take the family member out to eat. It is hard to have a private conversation at a restaurant where you don't want to cry and other people will be stopping by to say hello. It may work better to call the bereaved person and ask if you can come by to talk to them. Setting up a time in the future may work, although grieving people can have a hard time maintaining a schedule. It may be better to call when you can go over right away and eliminate the need to plan. Conversations should be kept shorter as the pain is hard to endure.

People who have experienced a loss will enjoy human contact again, and there is a transition period when less is more. Respecting people's public privacy in the weeks and months after a death will be welcomed and in time our "How are you" "I am fine" exchanges will work again.



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