



Children's National™

Chaplaincy Services

A photograph of a group of people hugging outdoors. A young man in a grey sweater is hugging a woman in a red jacket, who is hugging another woman in a light pink shirt. They are standing in front of a bright, sunlit background, possibly a beach or a park. The image is framed by a red border with circular cutouts.

Friends and Family

Caring for Your Loved Ones

Caring for Yourself

The child of your child has died and nothing will ever be the same again...
(See, "Grandmothers and Grandfathers: the Other Parents")

The child of your brother or sister has died and nothing will ever be the same again. . .

The child of your dear friend has died and nothing will ever be the same again.

Your grief is deep and powerful. No one can say that it is more or less "real" grief than experienced by this child's parents. But it is different.



You grieve the death of a special child - and also grieve the grief of her/his parents.

In some ways your grief may be able to be more “pure” than that of the child’s parents. It is not likely that you will be responsible for planning and carrying out funeral and burial, or deciding what to do about the child’s possessions. We can’t say you will move through your grief more easily or swiftly. This is your grief. And your relationship with this child was special. We can provide this resource for your grief, and to assist you in being effective as well as caring in your concern for your child, sibling, or friend.

Let’s begin with you:

It will be easy, and seem to be right, to run yourself ragged taking care of others.

But to truly help, you need to care for yourself. And you need to grieve. It’s so important for you to find someone who is there just for you. Someone to listen to your sadness, and your questions, someone who can pick up your kids from soccer and after school events.

Who are these persons that you can call on for your needs:

(List Names and Phone Numbers)

You also need to grieve on your own. You need to shed some tears that are just about you and your loss. You need to find ways to remember, and to say good-bye, that matter to you. Look at pictures, make a scrapbook, take a walk to a favorite place of the child who died, plant a flower/tree.

What will you/ what would you like to do for your own grieving?

Some Helpful Things To Do and Say _____

"I'm sorry."

"I'm sad for you."

"Tell me about (name of child)"

"Is there anyone you want me to call for you?"

"Take all the time you need."

"Would you like some company, or would you like some time alone?"

"I'll call you at ten (or noon, or 4)." Now, do it!

Drop by. Don't wait for someone grieving to call on you, you can always ask when you arrive, "Would you like some company?"

Send flowers or a card or something more creative that is symbolic of this special child. Don't forget the child's siblings, they will appreciate a card or remembrance gift, too.

Tell the child's family your favorite story about this child.

Make a picture album or scrapbook to share with the family all about how you knew this child and why s/he was important in your life.

Cry together

You can probably help with cooking, cleaning, running errands, doing laundry –but ask first, and ask how someone would like something done. It might not matter, but it is one thing the family can feel some control about.

Volunteer to take siblings to appointments.

Volunteer to call the people who might not learn about this quickly, for instance the siblings dentist or teachers, so that they can be prepared to interact compassionately the next time they are together.

Some Important Things Not To Say or Do _____

“I understand how you feel.”

“It was God’s will.”

“It happened for the best.”

“Something good will come of this.”

“You need to be strong, don’t cry.”

“You’re young, you can have other children.”

“God needed him/her more than you did.”

“S/he’s in a better place.”

“You’ll get over it.”

Do Not pack up a child’s room because his/her parents:

“don’t need to see this. . .” “don’t need to do this. . .” or

“can’t cope with this. . .”

They do - and can. Let them know, when they bring it up, that you are available to help in ways that they find appropriate. Follow their lead. There is no right time frame for putting, or giving, things away.

Do Not decide and pressure parents that siblings either should or should not attend calling hours, funeral, or burial. If you have questions or concerns raise them with the parents to see what they have considered. Encourage them to find out what the siblings want to do. Perhaps they would like to go to the funeral home, but not into the room where the body of their brother or sister is. You can volunteer to stay with them in an anteroom.

Do Not tell siblings that they need to be strong for mom and dad. This is such a hard, sad, even scary time for them too. They have been separated from their parents by the necessity of the time and attention they have had to give to the child who has

been dying. Siblings need assurance that their parents will not forget them because of their own grief, or will not leave them because the child's sadness is too much to bear. There are other ways siblings can "help" their parents without suppressing their own emotions. But you may be someone who becomes a special "listener" for a sibling - and help them tell their parents what they feel and need.

Do Not give unsolicited advice.

Do Not say, "Give me a call if you need anything." Just getting up in the morning is a big decision. You call them!

Do Not try to make sense of this senseless death or try to give it a deep meaning. You can ask parents and siblings what meaning they find, or what this child has taught them through all his/her life, and especially this experience.

Do Not abandon the parents or siblings. Sometimes another's grief feels almost unbearable to us. Or we are ashamed of our own grief, or of not knowing what to say or do. We can fear that we are intruding. Don't worry about doing this perfectly - or even well - you're not supposed to be an expert at this. Just stay. Care. Love the people you love.



Typical Stages of

SHOCK

DENIAL

ANGER

BARGAINING

DEPRESSION

ACCEPTANCE



Grief



This appears to be a nice, neat list. But none of these feelings are experienced neatly. Nor are they mandated to follow this particular order. Someone may go through all these stages consecutively and then begin to repeat stages. In any order. A second stage of anger may be much more acute and powerful than an earlier one.

Don't try to hurry your friend or family member through these stages, and don't expect them to follow one another in any way that makes sense to you. They will make sense to the one who is grieving. Also remember that people grieve differently. Much depends upon previous experiences of loss and grief and how they were resolved, or not resolved. Age and developmental stages impact how one may grieve. Young children, adolescents, and adults have different ability to experience, understand, and communicate what they are feeling. Men and women tend to grieve differently. Don't judge. If you can, stay present to your friend's or family member's grief process. Let them know that wherever they are right now is normal - and that you will not be frightened by their grieving.



HOWEVER, be alert to signs of unhealthy grieving.

A parent who turns their child's room into a shrine and allows nothing to be disturbed, or a parent who is unable to give any attention to other children or somehow expects the siblings to completely replace the child who died - ignoring their individuality, for instance, demanding that a brother become a member of the football team because the child who died was a star quarterback can be unhealthy grieving. This can be an unhealthy focus for the sibling as well - the child might decide that she or he must become exactly like the brother or sister who died. If your relationship with the parent or sibling is strong and trusting point out what you observe without judgment

Also, do not expect grieving to be constant - either for your friend or family member or for yourself. Times of deepest despair can be followed by times of utter joy. Pleasure, playing, resting, taking enjoyment in life is also part of the cycle of grief. However, these can also be occasions when feelings of guilt are aroused. Remind those you love, and yourself, that taking pleasure in life does not mean that you are forgetting, or will forget, the child who died. This child will always be missed, and always be grieved. But life is also to be lived.

Be as aware as possible of yourself, and those whom you love. Seek help for the times the grief becomes too difficult to handle.

If you need a list of helping resources/persons in the area please call the Grief, Loss, and Remembrance Program at Children's Hospital: 202-476-3321.





**For more information, contact
Bereavement Coordinator
Children's National Medical Center
Washington, DC
202-476-3321
www.childrensnational.org**

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