

Supporting bereaved parents

Family and friends are important sources of support. The best help you can offer is to try to understand the needs of the bereaved family. You help when you are honest, concentrate on the needs of the family, are patient with the family, give the family options and respect the family's decisions.

As family, friends or workmates of bereaved parents, we naturally want to help in whatever ways we can to ease their distress. Unfortunately, many of us don't seem to know how to do this effectively. Not knowing what to do or say, we fall back on the old standbys of telling people 'it will be alright' or trying to 'cheer them up' or giving 'good' advice. When these approaches don't seem to help, we feel inadequate, embarrassed and may pull away from the family just when they need us most. Families who cope best with their loss are generally those with close family and friends who are able and willing to support them for as long as it takes. Knowing how best to help means knowing the individual family member's strengths and weaknesses as well as their basic needs as they grieve.

The needs of bereaved families

1. To have their loss accepted as real, important and emotionally painful. They are not helped by any suggestion that their loss is not as important as those of others or that they are 'going overboard' with their grief.
2. To be encouraged to express all their emotions, both the positive ones and the more difficult negative feelings.
3. To be reassured that their individual reactions, even if they seem abnormal, are natural to someone in a situation such as theirs.
4. To be allowed to grieve in their own way for as long as they need.
5. To have a community with some knowledge and understanding of their situation
6. These are the basis needs of grieving families. You, as close friends and family of grieving families, may already KNOW how best to support your particular family member or friend. Overleaf are some suggestions for those who are unsure of the best ways to help.

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Supporting Parents

Supporting bereaved parents
after the loss of a baby





How can you help?

Be Honest

Being honest about your thoughts and feelings will encourage bereaved families to express what they really feel rather than thinking they have to be 'strong' to please others. If you feel helpless or inadequate, say so.

I really feel so useless. I want to say something to make you feel better but I don't know what to say. I do care about you and my heart aches when I see you so upset.

If you feel like crying, cry. But be careful that you are not expecting the bereaved family to comfort you rather than your comforting them. If you find the situation is too much for you, find some support for yourself from others around you before you attempt to comfort the bereaved family.

At times people who can't cope with the bereaved family avoid them completely. In doing so, the bereaved family may be left feeling alone and isolated. It is better to contact a bereaved family and bumble through with an honest expression of your feelings than to fail to contact them, or to contact them much later with the lame excuse of having been 'too busy' to ring.

The best words to use to express your feelings are those that roll around and around in your head as you desperately search for the 'right thing' to say. Instead of being honest and saying what we are thinking we rely on well worn sayings. Most of these sayings do not help, at least in the early days of grief. '

"Don't cry. It won't help", 'Cheer up. It could be worse. I know a lady....', 'You mustn't dwell on it. It will only make it worse', 'It's God's will' 'It's probably for the best'' You mustn't be angry. That doesn't help anyone' 'You don't really mean that', 'I know how you feel'.

All these common sayings deny the bereaved family's right to have such strong emotions. They are left feeling misunderstood, isolated and guilty about their normal reactions to their loss.

It is more helpful to say things that encourage the family to express their emotions when they feel the need.

'It's OK. Cry as much as you like if it helps'
'Hey, yell at me if it will make you feel better'
'It must just tear you apart. I can't imagine how difficult this must be for you'
'I can't do much but I have good ears for listening and broad shoulders to lean on if you need them'

Concentrate on the needs of the bereaved family

In many instances it will be relatively easy to see what the family's needs are at a particular time. If you keep your eyes and ears open, their need to talk or to be left alone will be shown in the way they react to your conversation. Accept their right to feel sad even if you can't really understand that parents could feel so deeply about a baby 'they hardly knew'. Often many bereaved parents will want to talk about the baby and/or pregnancy, particularly in the early days after the death. They will be greatly comforted by those who are willing and able to share memories with the family and are able to use the baby's name without appearing uncomfortable.

"It does not help to have people say at least you had him for 13 days. Because really it feels now like I was in a trance all that time and was not really coping then either. I wish my relatives had congratulated me and sent cards on the birth even though it was premature. I wish my friends had seen the baby and touched him so that they too could also share my grief."

Be guided by the parents' reactions. Don't push other babies under their noses, or, on the other hand, whisk babies away when bereaved parents are around. Be sensitive to the family's need to remember their baby on special occasions or anniversaries such as the first birthday of the anniversary of the death or miscarriage. In social situations, be aware of the bereaved parents and if they are obviously uncomfortable with a conversation or particular person provide a means of escape for them if they want to take it.

Be patient with the parents

Grieving the death of a baby or a miscarriage often takes much longer than those who have not experienced such a loss would expect. Initially, parents often need to speak about their dead baby or the pregnancy constantly and you need to be patient even if you have heard the same story many times. Don't be critical or try to change the topic of conversation. Be patient with parents for however long it takes for them to cope with their loss. Encourage them to be patient with their recovery by not expecting too much of themselves too soon. Be ready and willing to forgive angry remarks or 'snapping' by parents.

"Anne was born in December 1981. Christmas the following year was a family Christmas with all the

nieces and nephews. I was feeling sad and sorry for myself. My sister attacked me for 'feeling sorry for myself and ruining everyone's Christmas'. I just fell apart. Not then, nor ever during my years of infertility, did I begrudge them their children. I still do."

Provide the parents with options

It is important to allow parents to feel they have some control over their situation. You can help by giving them options to choose from rather than 'taking over'. Offer suggestions of what you could do to help and give them the option of whether or not to accept your offer. Don't be offended if your offer of help is refused. In fact make it easy for parents by telling them that you want to help but will not be offended if your help is not wanted at the time or is the wrong kind of help. Practical help can be as important as an offer of a shoulder to cry on. Give attention to children in the family and don't just focus on one partner. The whole family needs support.

Respect the bereaved family and their decisions

Don't try to force solutions on the family. Let them decide whether or not they go back to work, have another baby or have other children monitored. We all need to be humble in the face of death. All of us must deal with grief one day. If you recognize this, it will help you see that your bereaved friend or relation deserves support and respect during their time of grief. Don't feel you have to solve their problems or take away their pain. Individuals will find their own way through grief. You can help by supporting them on their way, not trying to make their grief go away, something you can't do anyway.

