

• **Time does not heal all wounds:** Everyone grieves differently and therefore the grief process should not be rushed. Some parents will be "fine" and then experience deep grief a year or two later; others grieve immediately. Don't try to rush a parent through their healing. Statements such as "Your child would not like to see you like this. He would want you to be happy." can be devastating. They might even arouse anger. Be aware that a bereaved parent's sorrow, depression, anger may last far longer than society might expect. You are fortunate to be a supporter, rather than one of the prime grievers. Hang on with them.

• **Closure** is a meaningless word when applied to the death of a child. There will never be the kind of closure that ends this pain, although the pain will lessen. Let the parents know that you will journey with them.



Each loss is unique, but we do not have to be alone as we grieve.

Help us remember our loved one. There is no such thing as "closure" when it comes to love. The only thing that closes at a funeral is the casket! You don't stop loving someone just because they died. Talk about the deceased, share your memories and let me share mine.

Darcie D. Sims

A Friend

*I need a friend to sit with me,
To help me struggle through
The sadness and the anger,
The crying I will do.*

*I need a friend to sit with me,
To help me work this out,
The guilt and all the anguish,
The times I'll want to shout.*

*I need a friend to sit with me,
To help me through my pain,
The longing and the emptiness,
The need to speak his name.*

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For support in your area contact:



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How to Help When a Child Dies



**THE
COMPASSIONATE
FRIENDS
OF CANADA**

An international peer support
organization for bereaved parents
and their surviving children

A Child Has Died...

The death of a child, no matter the age or circumstance, is one of the most devastating experiences that a parent can go through. Friends and families are at a loss, not knowing what to do or say. What does a bereaved parent need from those around them? What are the best things you could do? What are the worst? What are you going to say? The following suggestions may help you ease their pain.

How Can I Help?

- **Acknowledge the loss:** With a visit, a call, or a card, you can say, "I love you" and "I'm so sorry for your loss." If you are lost for words, a simple hug can speak volumes. Doing nothing is the worst, for bereaved parents then feel as though their child's existence is being denied. Grieving parents need to know that you are there for them, that you care about what they are going through. You cannot take away their pain or "fix it", but you can bring comfort and support by simply "being there".
- **Listen:** The best gift you can give a grieving parent is your listening ear. Be there to listen to their anger, their confusion, their guilt feelings. Use affirmative nods and murmurs rather than commenting on these feelings. Let them repeat themselves—they may need to describe the death circumstances again and again.
- **Be patient:** Be responsive to the changes that a grieving person experiences. If the bereaved withdraws or lashes out in anger, remain calm and remain supportive. Don't make the bereaved the "office project" to cheer up. Some depression is an expected and a necessary part of the journey. Be patient. Grief lasts longer than anyone expects!

- **Be available** to help with responsibilities. Even though a life has stopped, life doesn't. One of the best ways to help is to run errands, prepare food, take care of the kids, help with chores or the simplest of maintenance. Be aware of what needs to be done and offer to do specific tasks. It's no use saying, "Call me if you need anything." At this stage, the person who is grieving will be overwhelmed at the simple thought of picking up a phone. If you are close to this person, simply stop over and begin to help. People need this but don't think to ask.

- **Avoid judgment:** It may be tempting to offer help by way of advice: "You should" or "You shouldn't" are openings to avoid. A parent may hang on to a child's possessions for years, build a shrine to their child, sink into depression. Wherever their grieving process takes them, your words of advice cannot help. Just be there, listen, be supportive.

- **Share tears:** You may find yourself crying in response to the parent's pain and your own. You, too, may have loved the child. Don't hide your tears—they are healing.

- **Self-care** is difficult when besieged by the taxing emotions of grief. Help keep their house stocked with healthy foods that are already prepared, or easy to prepare. Give them time to rest. While it may be upsetting to see them withdrawing from people and activities, it is not abnormal. They will rejoin as they are ready.

- **Give special attention** to the surviving children. They are hurt, confused and often ignored—talk to them! Take them out for a treat.

- **Remember important dates:** Send a card, make a call, pay a visit on the dead child's birth or death date. Do not be afraid that mentioning the name of the dead child will cause additional pain. Sharing a fond memory or amusing anecdote brings reassurance to parents that you appreciated their child and are aware of their sense of loss. Laughter, like tears, is healing.

- **Clichés** are said with the intent of making the parent or family members feel better, to find something positive in the loss. When we care about someone, we hate to see them in pain. To try to minimize their hurt people will often say things like, "I know how you feel..."; "It was God's will..."; "Perhaps it was for the best or "You can always have another child". While this can work in some instances, it never works with grief. Don't try to make sense of the death or find a reason. The bereaved must search for their own meanings.

- **Decision making** is very difficult while working through the grief process. Be a sounding board for your friend or loved one and help them think through decisions.

- **Grief:** Isolation can be relieved for short periods of times with an invitation to dinner, a movie, a walk in the park or "take over" meal to their home. If your invitation is declined, don't give up. Consider inviting the parent out on important dates like the one-month anniversary. Be creative.

- **Stay in touch:** After a death, many friendships change or disintegrate. People don't know how to relate to the one who is grieving, or they get tired of being around someone who is sad. Make a commitment to see your friend through this, to be a light in their darkest hour.

