



Responding to Death— Tips for Friends

The news comes in a phone call: Linda learns her best friend's husband has died unexpectedly. She feels compelled to go to Pam, to be by her side. But she wonders what she can do to help. What would you do? What should you do?

Your first and most important objective should be providing emotional support. Be understanding, sympathetic and nonjudgmental. Never betray a confidence.

When death occurs unexpectedly, survivors initially are in shock. Only later do they feel the full impact of the loss. At first they might appear detached.

Remember: Any expression of grief is acceptable. Help the survivor feel comfortable with her emotions. Allow her to maintain self-esteem; assure her that her feelings are normal.



Let your friend know that she and her feelings are important to you. Do not hesitate to speak her husband's name, to talk about him. It will be meaningful for you to share your memories with her. Conversations that begin, "Do you remember when . . . ?" and "I'll never forget when . . . ," evoke wonderful memories and let her know you valued her loved one. It may comfort her to discuss what he gave back to life in general and, more specifically, to your life. Let her know your life is richer for having known her husband.

Of course, the same principles apply in the death of a wife, parent, child or other loved one.

Listening is perhaps the greatest gift you can give. If your bereaved friend feels the need to talk—and she probably will—be a good listener. Accept periods of silence gracefully. Your listening will

comfort, guide, and heal. Listen attentively to good and bad memories, fears and regrets, feelings of guilt and relief.

PROVIDE PRACTICAL ASSISTANCE

When appropriate, help organize activities related to the funeral. Guide your bereaved friend gently, ask questions but avoid offering advice. Act as a sounding board for decision-making. You might assist with activities such as:

- Contacting your friend's spiritual leader.
- Notifying out-of-town relatives, friends or business associates of the death and funeral arrangements.
- Arranging overnight stays for guests; deciding who will meet those arriving at the airport.



- Listing tasks: clothes to be cleaned, special purchases to be made, errands to be run.
- Itemizing food and disposable tableware and arranging for their purchase.
- Arranging for delivery of additional chairs for guests.

Depending on how long it takes family members to arrive, you might help organize the funeral and make preliminary decisions about location, time, clergy, music, scripture, readings, pallbearers and burial clothing. Be sure to consider funeral arrangements made in advance. If necessary, notify organizations such as veterans groups or lodges that might play a part in the service.



Of the deceased person, the funeral director will need the following:

- Social Security card or number
- Veterans discharge papers or DD2-14 form
- Life insurance papers (optional)
- Photograph (for hair style and possible publication in the newspaper)
- Clothing, including underwear and socks
- Notification of the need to remove jewelry, glasses, or any symbolic items prior to burial
- Biographical information
- Lodge and its number

Be sensitive to circumstances of the death, to interpersonal dynamics, to your own judgment. Know when to participate actively and when to fade into the background.

Organize a system for keeping track of helpfulness and other kind gestures: Note who brought food and flowers; set out a guest book for visitors to sign;

label food containers with the names of contributors. A spiral notebook set beside the telephone for recording incoming calls will provide a handy reference later. As the pace picks up, join with others in following through on planned activities:

- Make phone calls.
- Answer the phone and door, making sure to keep logs for each.
- Note on an index card each task that needs completing. When someone volunteers to help, ask them to select a task from the card stack.
- Run errands and make necessary purchases.
- Change beds, tidy the home and do laundry as needed.
- Plan for child care, parent care, or care for other participants who might need special assistance.
- Make arrangements for the care of pets or farm animals.
- Oversee food service, storage, and kitchen cleanup.
- Make arrangements and enter into schedules with those who would make and bring food so everything does not come at once.
- Organize house-sitting during visitation and funeral.
- Check incoming flowers and house plants to make sure they are being watered and cared for adequately.
- Try to arrange for additional help when needed and arrange for other friends to help guide the process.
- Be adaptable: Remain sensitive to unanticipated special needs.

When close friends and family members arrive, take time to fill them in on all preliminary plans; agree on which you are to follow through on, reaffirming that you are on call.

The weeks and months to come can be very lonely and demanding, a time when your friendship can make all the difference.



AFTER THE FUNERAL OR MEMORIAL SERVICE: AN ARRAY OF PRACTICAL CHALLENGES

In the months immediately after a death, loved ones are typically faced with an array of challenges. Your friendship and guidance during this time can make a big difference. For example, beyond the difficult process of grieving and healing, let's look at a variety of the tasks Pam will now face. As we review some of her challenges, think of how you might be of emotional support and practical assistance.

Pam will have to close out the last chapters of her husband's affairs. His estate will have to be probated. If he left a will, his wishes must be carried out. If there is no will, his property must be dispersed to the satisfaction of the Internal Revenue Service and the tax laws of the state. His debts, including funeral expenses, will have to be paid. Will Pam be entitled to Social Security, worker's compensation, or veterans benefits?

As with most widows, Pam will probably need the services of an attorney to ensure that the best interest of the survivor(s) are served. She should select an attorney she has a good feeling about, and ideally one who is an experienced probate lawyer.

Particularly during these early months of widowhood, Pam will do well to avoid hasty decisions that would result in major lifestyle changes. For now, she needs to continue grieving and healing.

Though Pam will need time alone, she should fight loneliness and isolation by reaching out to

relatives and long-term friends. Developing new relationships is important too. A good place to start is by joining a local bereavement support group.

Because of Pam's personality and circumstances, she will want to make sure she stays in charge of her own life. She should guard against letting her children, friends or anyone else manage her life. She must avoid the temptation to become her child's child, and she must remain free to think independently and make her own choices.

Of major importance, Pam needs to take good care of herself. In addition to getting plenty of rest and relaxation, she will benefit from exercise she enjoys as well as eating moderate, nutritious and regular meals. And yes, she needs to pamper herself, perhaps with an appointment for a new hair style, a professional massage, a new outfit, or a week of vacationing.

Pam might find that keeping a daily diary of thoughts and feelings is helpful. At first she may feel more depressed than ever, but as the weeks and months pass, small signs of improvement will emerge. Each person has his or her own timetable for grieving--everyone is different.

Above all else, Pam should be sensitive to and follow her own inner guidance. In her heart of hearts, she knows what is right for her better than anyone else.

Put yourself in Pam's shoes: What would you appreciate?



PROVIDING ONGOING FRIENDSHIP AND SUPPORT

It has now been three months since Pam's husband died. Friends and family members don't come around as often anymore. Feeling sad, lonely, and unsure of herself Pam struggles to pick up the pieces. Her friend, Linda, also a recent widow, has been a tremendous help, putting Pam in touch with a bereavement support group, calling her once or twice a week, frequently joining her for dinner. "Linda is a great listener," Pam says. "She accepts me for who I am, she cares, and she believes in me."

We all need friends like Linda, especially during the long months after a major loss. Good friends listen without judging or showing impatience.

A grieving person might talk of a loved one's life or death, telling you the same story repeatedly. Listen openly and responsively. And remember: Your presence alone is a gift, as is an occasional hug or hand for holding. Don't worry too much about what to say. Focus on caring and listening. Beyond that, relax and be yourself, say whatever feels right.

Author Ann Kaiser Stearns said it well: "Without the comfort and love of other human beings, none of us is very strong. Aligned with others who accept us and support us, we can survive most anything." Comfort and support can take a variety of forms—a card of sympathy, a personal note, a gesture of helpfulness, or a meal lovingly prepared.

Bereavement groups also are important sources of help. However, some people don't like participating in group discussions. They might think their grief is too personal to share with strangers. Logistics can be a problem, too, especially in some rural areas, where transportation might be difficult to arrange.

In such cases, support can be given one-on-one, and it needn't take a lot of time. A friendly phone call or visit and an unexpected gift can help ease pain, provide perspective, and help motivate your friend to cook a meal or perform other daily tasks.

Remember, time alone will not heal grief. It must be faced and dealt with. In the process, we learn and grow. The best memorial to a loved one is the abiding, inner strength that can be built on a foundation of good memories. Life is enriched by such things.

The following Arab proverb describes some qualities of friendship helpful to a person in grief:

*A Friend
is someone to whom we may
pour out all the contents of our heart,
chaff and grain together, knowing that the
gentlest of hands will take and sift it,
keep what is worth keeping, and
with a breath of kindness
blow the rest away.*

REFERENCES:

Beil, B. (1984). *Let Me Plant Your Garden*. Growing Through Grief, Inc., P. O. Box 269, Arnold, MD 21101.
Oaks, J. (1993). *Grieving Well*. Workshop, Baptist Regional Medical Center, Corbin, KY, June 1993.
Stearns, A. (1985). *Living Through Personal Crisis*. New York: Ballantine.

Prepared by Pauline Hunter, M.S., RD., Doctoral Candidate Communications; Jean Baugh, Fayette County Extension Agent for Home Economics; Rebecca Brooker, Boone County Extension Agent for Home Economics; and Sam Quick, Human Development & Family Relations Specialist For his editorial assistance, we extend appreciation to Robert L. Kaiser, Jr., Journalist, Lexington, Kentucky.

This Grief Work publication is one of a large series of fact sheets on topics related to death and dying. Educational programs of the Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service serve all people regardless of race, color, age, sex, religion, disability, or national origin.

Copyright©1998 University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service, 206 Scovell, Lexington, KY 40546-0064.

Made available in Iowa by Iowa State University Extension.

... and justice for all
The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) prohibits discrimination in all its programs and activities on the basis of race, color, national origin, gender, religion, age, disability, political beliefs, sexual orientation, and marital or family status. (Not all prohibited bases apply to all programs.) Many materials can be made available in alternative formats for ADA clients. To file a complaint of discrimination, write USDA, Office of Civil Rights, Room 326-W, Whitten Building, 14th and Independence Avenue, SW, Washington, DC 20250-9410 or call 202-720-5964.
Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, Acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Stanley R. Johnson, director, Cooperative Extension Service, Iowa State University of Science and Technology, Ames, Iowa.

