



The Compassionate Friends

Offering friendship and understanding to bereaved parents

SUGGESTIONS FOR CLERGY

BE IN TOUCH WITH YOUR OWN FEELINGS

Don't emotionally separate yourself from the grief-stricken family. Becoming an honest part of the hurt establishes a relationship for sharing. Showing emotion does not mean the loss of objectivity and professionalism.

HELP WITH PRACTICAL NEEDS

Be sensitive to different types of death: miscarriage, stillbirth, suicide, murder, accident or illness. Go immediately to the family when notified of the death.

PROVIDE A CARING PRESENCE

There are no answers to be offered at the time of a child's death. "Being there" is your expression of caring. Serve as an advocate for the family when necessary with the hospital personnel, coroner, police or funeral director.

LISTEN

Bereaved parents need to express themselves. Some feelings expressed may cause others discomfort and may reflect untruths or inaccuracies. Being accepting of what is authentic to them is more important than any clergy words.

Help the family with decisions that need to be made about viewing of the body of the loved one, funeral arrangements, visitation by friends and burial rites. Remember that parents have to live a lifetime with decisions that are made. Do not allow grandparents to take over and make decisions for the immediate family.

ACCEPT THE SUFFERING AND PAINFUL GRIEF

Bereavement causes great pain, an emotional ripping apart. Do not think that if a person is "strong" or "has faith", he or she will not allow or express deep feelings and emotions. It is healthy to grieve. Avoid clichés such as: "Well, you have other children", "You're young and you can have other babies", "It's God's will", "He's better off", "She's with God now", or "Now you have an angel in heaven". These ideas bring comfort to some parents, but arouse negative emotions in others.

Involve the family, including any remaining children (the forgotten mourners), in planning the funeral service, visitation and burial rites. When stillbirth or infant death occurs, attempt to involve the mother in funeral or burial rites. Ask for and take into consideration the family suggestions regarding the readings, prayers, music and other service details.

ALLOW SILENCE

The clergy may be skilled with words. However, when called upon to touch the lives of parents who have experienced the death of a child, you may need to be sparing with words. Silence allows a space within which the family can cry, shout out in anger, doubt, plead with God or fall into his or her own painful quiet. A caring silence is a valuable ministry.

The funeral service should maintain a balance between the acknowledgment of pain, suffering, grief and the assurance of God's love, God's aid, hope and life. Use the child's name in prayers and in the homily. One of the most common complaints of bereaved parents

is that the preacher never once spoke the name of the deceased child.

Personalize the service as much as possible while maintaining theological and religious integrity.

If you do not know the family well, take time to become acquainted so that your ministry will be more personal and helpful.

REMAIN OPEN TO LONG-TERM CARE

Attention is given to bereaved families for the first 4-5 weeks, but from then on many families feel lonely and isolated. Make a personal visit! Telephone the family from time to time to let them know that they are remembered. Try to be particularly sensitive around holiday times, the child's birthday and the anniversary of the death. Mention the child's name and help parents recall the joyful as well as the sorrowful memories.

HELP THE PARENTS TO DISCOVER THE VALUE OF SELF-HELP GROUPS

Bereaved parents need your caring ministry. Many parents and families can also benefit from the support available through a self-help group such as The Compassionate Friends. Your personal encouragement of the concept of self-help actually will strengthen the pastoral relationship rather than threaten it. Do not refer parents to The Compassionate Friends or similar groups.

GIVE COMFORT

Be present and listen, really listen. Help parents grasp a glimmer that even in life's greatest pain, God remains present and working in the lives of His people. Share your faith and religious beliefs in a gentle, caring manner. Remember that nothing will better communicate God's love than your compassionate presence.

These suggestions have been prepared by bereaved parents and clergy of the Protestant, Roman Catholic and Jewish faiths.

This brochure was funded by ITHUBA

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