



Bereavement Guide

Help for anyone navigating
grief support



Indiana
Department
of
Health

Division of
**Family Health Data
and Fatality Prevention**



Introduction

This guide was created for anyone who provides care or support for a patient, client, family member, or friend after the loss of a loved one. For those that touch the life of someone who is grieving, please know that your love and support for the bereaved is a very important key to their overall well-being and can help mold their path on this tough road ahead. This tool was created to help ease any worries and provide encouragement as you help them navigate through their journey.

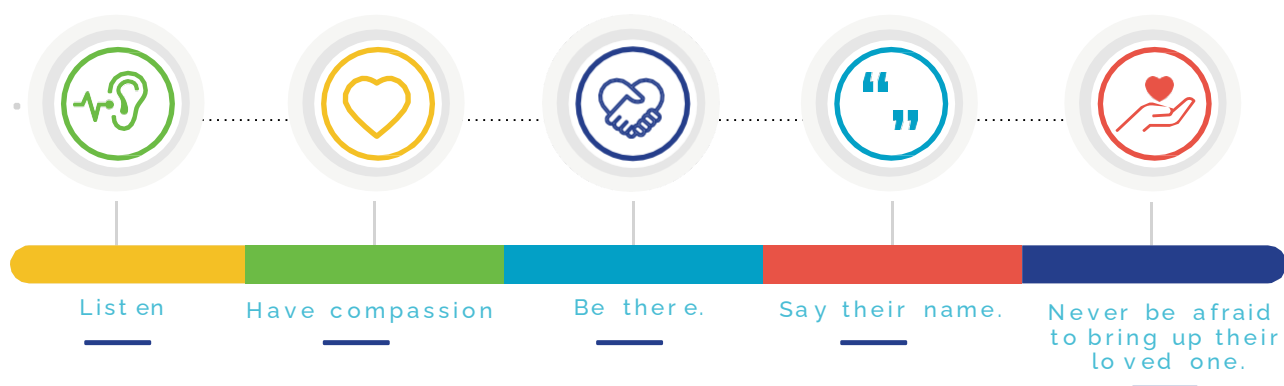


Bereavement Support

Helping Those Who Are Grieving

The most fundamental ways to help someone who is grieving are:

- **Listen.** Helping begins with your ability to be an active listener. Your physical presence and desire to listen without judging are critical helping tools. Don't worry so much about what you will say. Just concentrate on listening to the words that are being shared with you.
- **Have compassion.** Give the person who is grieving permission to express their feelings without fear of criticism or judgment. Try to learn and understand. Don't instruct or set expectations.
- **Be there.** Your ongoing and reliable presence is the most important gift you can give. While you cannot take the pain away, nor should you try to, you can enter into it by being there for the griever.
- **Say their names.** Whether you are talking to a bereaved parent, grandparent, or child never shy away from saying their loved one's name or terms such as "Mom" or "Dad," etc. This helps the grieving person to heal.
- **Never be afraid to bring up their loved one.** If you are following up with a grieving parent, family member, or friend do not be afraid to bring up their loss for fear of upsetting them. Chances are, those left behind after a loss are already thinking about their loved one and silently hopes that others will bring them up. This helps them to know that their loved one isn't forgotten by others. This is especially true for grieving parents. Often times their biggest fear is that others will forget their child. Grievers are often afraid to bring up the topic first in fear of making others uncomfortable.



Children & Grief

Talking to children about a death

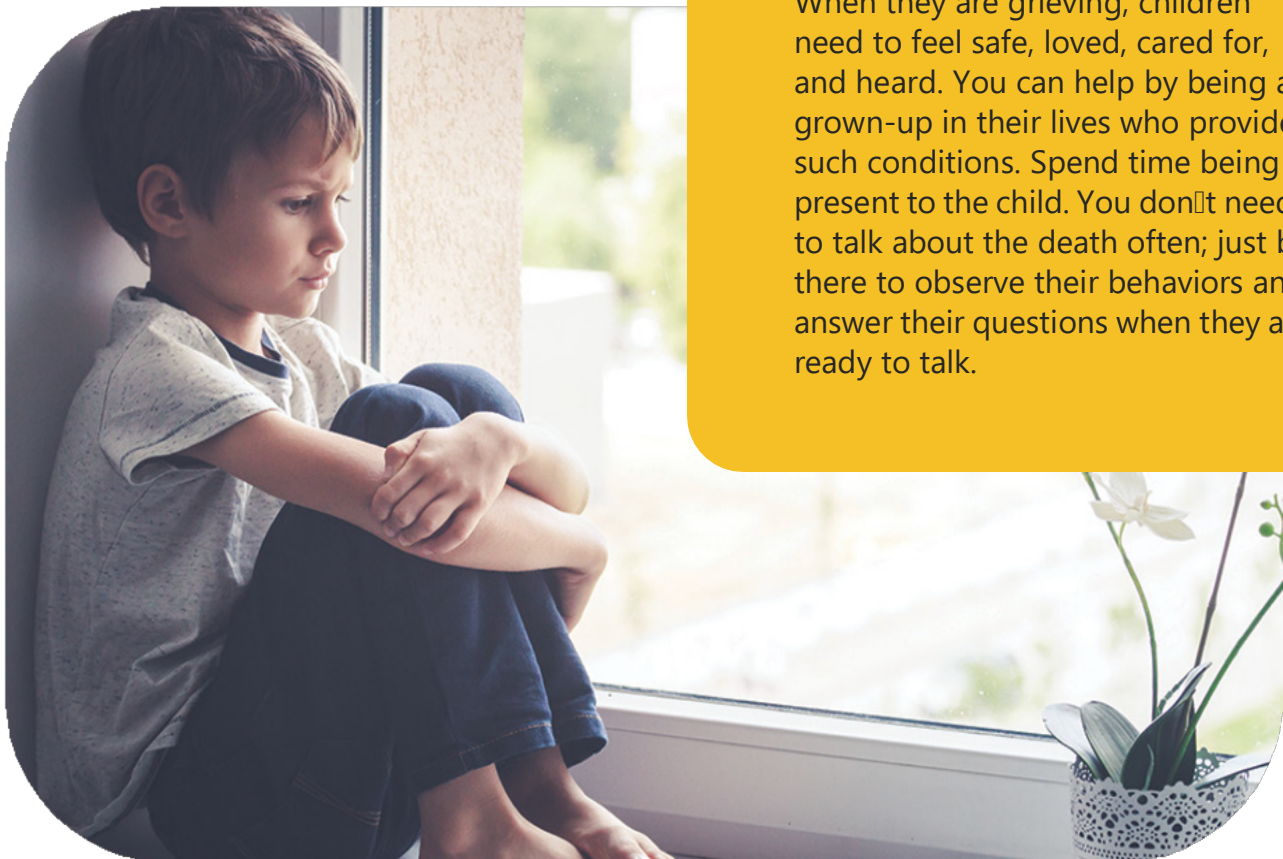
- Speak gently. Also be honest and open, at their level of developmental understanding.
- Say the words "died" and "dead." Explain what that means if the child is very young.
- Talk just a little, then stop. Give the child a chance to process what you have said and to respond. If the child asks questions, answer them honestly. If the child wants to go off and play or is hungry or distracted, understand that this is normal. Children can only absorb difficult conceptual realities in small doses. They are naturally self-absorbed, but this does not mean they do not care or are acting inappropriately. It just means they are being children.

How children grieve differently

Any child old enough to love is old enough to mourn, but their mourning often looks different than ours. Children tend to grieve in small spurts, showing sadness only occasionally. Their grief might show up as physical complaints, such as headaches or stomach-aches. They also use play to express what they're thinking and feeling. In general, their behaviors are a better indication of their grief than their words. Later in their grief journey once they realize that their loved one isn't coming back and that reality sets in, children may begin to ask more questions about death. Be prepared to answer their questions with honest and brief answers so that they can accurately process the information.

Ways to help

When they are grieving, children need to feel safe, loved, cared for, and heard. You can help by being a grown-up in their lives who provides such conditions. Spend time being present to the child. You don't need to talk about the death often; just be there to observe their behaviors and answer their questions when they are ready to talk.



Teens & Grief

Talking to teens about a death

- Be gentle but honest. Talk a little, then wait for the teen's response and questions.
- Follow their lead. Try not to get upset if the teen reacts inconsiderately or seems unmoved. Remember that teenagers are still figuring out how to handle challenging social situations in a “grown-up” way. Offer physical comfort if the teen will allow it.

How teens grieve differently

Death for teens is complicated because it falls at a time when they are naturally gaining independence and separating from their parents and family. They still need comfort and companionship through a death, but they might naturally resist the seeming sense of dependence this brings. Teens often turn toward friends, rather than family, for support. Grieving teens sometimes act out or pull away from school, friends, family, and activities. Minor stresses seemingly unrelated to the death can trigger dramatic overreactions. Teens may also isolate themselves at times. This is normal as they may just need the quiet time alone to process their feelings.

Ways to help

Be present to and patient with grieving teens. They may look like grown-ups on the outside, but they are still very much figuring things out on the inside. If you have a good relationship with the teen, try to spend time with them. This may mean “along-side” activities more than face-to-face conversations. If you observe dangerous behaviors, then it's time to be calm but confrontive. Remember that grief and loss are probably contributing to any acting out, so try to be understanding even as you set firm limits. If a teen is acting out, try to have an open conversation with the teen about their actions before you punish them. Give them the opportunity to learn how to express their feelings with words.



Parents & Grandparents Grief

Talking to grieving parents about a death

Grieving parents have a tough road ahead of them. They need all the love and support you can give. While you can't make their pain go away, you can be there for them. You can be one of the brave, caring people who doesn't shy away from them, as so many others will do. You can watch and listen as they express whatever they are thinking and feeling. This is not easy, but it's the kind of help they need to begin to process their grief and move toward healing. Refrain from giving advice, judging, or sharing what others in their shoes have done. Instead, simply let them know they are heard and that you care.

Talking to grieving grandparents about a death

Grieving grandparents grieve twice. They grieve for the grandchild who died, and they grieve for their own child, who is grieving the death of a child. They need care and support as most grieving grandparents are often forgotten. Their grief tends to be overshadowed by the grief of the child's immediate family, so it's common for them to suffer in silence. Tell them you care and reach out to talk with them. When they share any thoughts and feelings about their loss, remember to listen without judging or offering advice



What should I not say to a grieving person?

What not to say to someone who is grieving

- Don't cry/Don't feel bad. Let them feel however it is they feel, there's no wrong emotional response to loss.
- You just need to keep yourself busy! Keeping busy might distract someone from the pain they are feeling temporarily, but it doesn't help them long term. And as soon as they have a moment of rest, they'll be hit with all of those feelings they've been pushing aside in favor of keeping busy—which can be much more overwhelming than just letting your feelings happen as they come.
- They are in a better place. When speaking to bereaved parents, especially, this statement can sting. For many, they feel that the best place for their child is with them.
- Time heals all wounds/It's time to move on. There is no moving on after a loss, there is only moving forward. Someone who is grieving must go through all of the emotions and there is no right or wrong way to do so. Unfortunately, there is no instruction manual for grief. Everyone responds to grief differently and we must be careful not to tell them to “move on” or that “time heals all wounds.” Grief doesn't end with complete healing; it simply never ends.
- I know how you feel. Even if you've lost someone, you don't know precisely what this person is feeling. Everyone experiences grief differently. Let them have their own, unique experience.
- They're no longer in pain. It can be a relief to see someone's long-time suffering end, but that relief that their pain has finally ended doesn't ease the pain of the loss of their loved one.
- You'll grow from this/Everything happens for a reason. Sometimes we do learn from loss. But it's not our job to make grief a teachable moment. Telling someone that they'll grow from this experience or that it happened for a reason dismisses their pain and implies that they should just try to see the glass as half full.
- You can have another child/At least you have your other children. Although the family member can possibly have or may already have other children, the child that they lost can't be replaced. These comments could make the grieving person feel guilty and may prevent them from going through the emotions that they need to go through in order to heal.



What can I say to a grieving person?

Things you can say to someone who's grieving:

- *I can't imagine the pain you must be feeling.* This is one of the best things you can say to someone who is grieving. It is open ended enough that if they want to, they can open up about how they're feeling.
- *Do you want to talk about what happened?* Many people avoid griever, unsure of how to behave around them. They aren't sure if they should mention the loss or not. This means that people who are grieving are left with very little support. Give those who are grieving a chance to talk about what happened and how they're feeling. If no one has asked yet, they may just be bottling up their feelings, afraid of making others uncomfortable.
- *I'm so sorry to hear you're going through this.* Let them know that their suffering is on your mind.



Community Partners & Healthcare Professionals: Following Up is Key

Bereavement support as a form of prevention

If your agency served a loss family at any point, it would be good practice to reach out to the family and conduct a wellness check in person or by phone.

- Let them know “We are sorry to hear you’re going through this,” and ask them how they are doing – let them do the talking.
- It’s best to make this outreach attempt at least 2 weeks or more after their loss. Following up a few weeks out not only allows them to adjust for a few weeks to their new normal but, this is also the timeframe when their friends and family have started back to their normal lives. The grieving family has not. They need extra support. A simple outreach to let them know they are in your agency’s thoughts goes a long way in their grief journey.
- Is it okay to follow up months or even years later? Absolutely! Remember, these families never stop thinking about their loved one and silently hope that others will mention them. If you first learn about their loss months later, don’t let that stop you from reaching out to them. Often you’ll get the best response from someone who is grieving several months into their grief journey, once that initial shock and denial stage of grief has passed.
- In the event that they say they are not doing well, ask them if they have any upcoming doctor’s appointments and encourage them to reach out to their provider, if not. More often than not, those who are grieving will tell you they are fine in an effort to not make others feel uncomfortable.



Documenting Bereavement Support

Document or flag each immediate family member's account indicating that they suffered a loss. This ensures that anyone else in your agency who may serve this family is aware of the situation.

- **Items to document in each immediate family member's account upon notification of a death:**
 - Decedent's name
 - Decedent's age at time of death
 - Relationship of family member and the decedent
- **Items to document with any unsuccessful outreach attempts:**
 - Date and time of the outreach
 - Type of outreach made (letter, phone, in person, etc.)
 - Next scheduled outreach attempt
 - A minimum of two outreach attempts are encouraged.
- **Items to document for each successful outreach:**
 - Date and time of the outreach
 - Type of outreach made (letter, phone, in person, etc.)
 - Note which family member you spoke with and their relationship to their lost loved one.
- **Details of the conversation:**
 - Family member's demeanor
 - Details of what was discussed
 - Do they have any follow-up appointments with their physician?
 - What to do if they state that they don't have a physician:
 - o If they indicate that they do not have a physician or if they have additional medical or mental health needs/concerns, contact their health insurance to make them aware of the situation and they can connect the individual in need to a medical provider or any other services that may be beneficial, including therapy options that specialize in grief support.
- **Any referrals that were offered:**
 - List of agencies where referrals were made and how the referrals were made
 - Important Note: Avoid any situation where the grieving person has to do a self-referral. When a referral is made on their behalf, they are more likely to follow through with any additional steps needed in that referral process.
- **Next steps, if needed:**
 - Note any future attempts that you may feel necessary or note if the family member declines any further bereavement outreaches.
 - One successful bereavement outreach attempt is all that is needed unless the person speaking to the grieving person feels that they may need additional support.

We're here to help



Division of **Family Health Data and Fatality Prevention**

Thank you for helping the Division of Family Health Data and Fatality Prevention at the Indiana Department of Health improve bereavement support across Indiana.

If you have any questions regarding bereavement support or how to expand your agency's role in this level of prevention, please contact:

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References:
www.centerforloss.com
www.griefrecoveryhouston.com



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