



Supporting Older Adults Through Grief

The reality of grief is far different from what others see from the outside.

There is pain in this world that you can't be cheered out of. You don't need solutions.

You don't need to move on from your grief. You need someone to see your grief.

To acknowledge it. You need someone to hold your hands while you stand there.

In blinking horror, staring at the hold that was your life. Some things cannot be fixed.

They can only be carried.

--Megan Devine

Grief comes from the French word *greve*, or "burden." Grief is an all-consuming, involuntary response—emotional, physical, social, and spiritual—to detachment from someone or something that gives a person meaning, such as an end of relationship, vocation, or location. It is a burden, a heavy weight, to be carried. Saint Paul urges members of a faith-filled community to help carry, or "Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ," *Galatians 6:2*

Having gotten thus far in reading this Quicksheet, it is obvious that your heart, soul, and mind are more than willing to support adults of any age in their grief. Now, you would like to know some thoughtful ways to support, not fix, someone in his/her/their grief. These suggestions come straight from the brokenhearted.

- ❖ **Be present** in person, through phone calls, or handwritten notes. Recently, a disheartened congregant commented, "Friends have reached out to me through email, texts, and Facebook. I wish they would come by or call."
- ❖ **Be quiet.** Your *listening* presence will promote comfort and healing. Avoid the trap of thinking that your empathy needs to be verbalized by sharing portions of your personal story. Your empathy gives you the courage and strength to be present and quiet. A

woman who experienced the death of her son commented, "Everybody wants to tell me about a death they've experienced or about a child they know who died. I don't give a damn about all that. I miss Brad!"

- ❖ **Be true** to your feelings and your words. By allowing your personal feelings to be expressed, you are most likely affirming the feelings of the bereaved. A widower shared with an element of surprise, "I was so moved to see a friend wipe away tears at my wife's memorial service. It showed me that he missed her, too."

As members of a faith community, we readily offer our support by saying, "I'll pray for you." These are comforting words. They remind us that we are able to muddle and move through our grief because friends *are* praying for us. The power of intercessory prayers is strengthened when we are specific in our offer. For example, "I'm going to pray for you each morning on my walk," or "I will lift you in prayer, by name, in my daily devotion." In so doing, our word and deed become one just as Christ is one with God and unites us in prayer.

- ❖ **Be forthcoming** in sharing stories about the deceased. One of the pains of grief is the fear that our loved one will be forgotten and we will no longer hear their name. Moreover, one of the comforts in grief is to hear the ways our loved ones interacted with others. Recalling stories of the deceased give credence to Scottish poet, Thomas Campbell's reflection, "To live in hearts we leave behind is not to die."
- ❖ **Be respectful** of the ongoing nature of grief. "Grief," said Queen Elizabeth II, "is the price we pay for love." Believing that love is stronger than death guides us in understanding that grief never disappears. It changes and we discover as Kahlil Gibran, writer and poet, professed, that our joy and our sorrow are inseparable.

Congregations can demonstrate support to members in the process of grief in these ways:

- ❖ Contact the bereft on the *birthdate* of the deceased, rather than on the anniversary of death. It is the *life* of a loved one that brings joy to remember. Questions to include in the conversation may include: Where was the deceased born? What was their favorite birthday dessert? How did like to celebrate the day?
- ❖ Place an *odd number* of chairs around tables set up for meals or other activities. Our culture is accustomed to planning for "couples" and forgets that widow or widower feels awkward and lonely sitting at a table for eight, especially with an empty chair beside them.
- ❖ Keep in mind that holidays, so full of traditions, are especially difficult. Make Valentine's (leave off the glitter!) for those in grief so they feel the community's love and support. Don't forget Easter cards with messages of "Alleluia! Christ is Risen!" Plan an All Saints Day pot-luck luncheon or Longest Night Dinner and invite the bereaved to bring their loved one's favorite dish. Invite them to share a story about the dish.
- ❖ Sit next to an individual who is in the process of grief during worship. It may have taken untold courage for the person to attend church. The worship space and service, (filled

with beauty, hymns, scripture, silence, and prayers) evokes a host of memories of being with their loved one, as well as a heightened awareness that they are now alone. Your presence is a visible reminder they are not alone; rather, they are in a community of faith, hope, and love that yearns to support them in their grief.

Last, but in no means least, refresh your understanding about the nature and dynamics of grief. Persons in raw or lingering grief feel supported by others who “get grief”—get the way it makes a confident person become fearful; a composed person feel like they are emotionally falling apart; a socially active person withdraw from the closest of friends; and a spiritually in tune friend turn into a cacophonous stranger. This is grief. This is normal.

A prayer for those who support others in their grief:

May you see with tender eyes
The wounds of those before you.
May you hear with well-tuned ears
The unspoken needs of those whose voices are muted.
May you hold with gentle hands
The bodies and the spirits of those you care for.

May the beauty of soul,
The strength of spirit,
The wholeness of being
Lead you, inspire you
And let you know your own
Beauty of soul,
Strength of spirit,
Wholeness of being.

May you know that,
As you care for others,
God cares for you, sees you,
Holds you tenderly.
Amen.

**Speaking from personal experience, sending cards to church members in anticipatory or daily grief (long-term medical conditions and/or isolation) is immeasurably kind and appreciated. My husband, Bob, had vascular dementia and Alzheimer’s. He would hold a card throughout the day, and I was able to read it to him over and over again. It would bring a smile to his face every time.*

Books and Resources for additional exploring

- **Faith & Grief Ministries**—on-line and in person monthly gatherings, workshops, and retreats; training to be certified workshop facilitator; and articles.
<https://www.faithandgrief.org/findsupport/>
- **Stephen Ministry**—contact your local congregation to connect with a layperson trained to provide one-to-one care to those in all types of grief.

- [Spiritual Directors International](#)—locate a spiritual director in your community who is trained to listen with compassion, ask open-ended questions, and point to holy activity in your life.
- ***The Caregiver’s Challenge: Living, Loving, and Letting Go*** by Maryann Schacht, Psychotherapist - Provides ins and outs of caregiving as well as how to stay connected to life--and love--through the intense, sad, and ultimately human journey of letting go.
- ***The Spirituality of Grief Ten Practices for Those Who Remain*** by Fran Tilton Shelton - Designed for individual and small groups to explore grief and engage in spiritual practices to discern the holy in the midst of grief.
- [Compassionate Friends](#)—support for adults who have experienced the death of a child.
- [Journey of Hope](#)--The mission is to renew hope, foster healing, and develop resilience in the hearts of children and their families grieving the death of a loved one.
- [Alzheimer’s Store](#)—wide range of products to support individuals and families at all stages of disease.
- [Parkinson’s](#)—The mission of Rock Steady Boxing is to equip our affiliates and empower the coaches to improve the quality of life of people with Parkinson’s disease through a non-contact, boxing-based fitness curriculum.

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