

Leaflet # 3: I could do with a chat

How to help someone close to you who has been bereaved

Someone close to you has been bereaved

A parent, brother, sister or other relation, or a friend perhaps. You may have been close to the person who has died too, but you're aware that the loss has hit the other person hard. What do you do and say? It's sometimes hard to know - people who have been bereaved often don't cry out for help, even if they sometimes feel like it.

"I didn't know what to think when my partner died. I couldn't make sense of anything. But when people wanted to be with me, or listened to me, at least I didn't feel I was going mad"

The opportunity to talk

Sometimes people who have lost a loved one want the opportunity to talk. They may want to talk about their feelings, their worries about the present and future, or sometimes just about getting through the practicalities that come after someone has died. And as someone close to them, you're specially placed to offer them those opportunities.

Where to start

- Start from the assumption that it's better to do something than nothing – to acknowledge loss rather than ignore it.
- Think of your own experiences – how you might feel under similar circumstances. But try to remember their grief may be different from yours.
- Look for invitations to talk from the other person. If they start talking about the person who has died, encourage them, even if it seems to make them upset.
- Be comforting when opening up the conversation rather than business-like.
- Don't be offended if your offer to talk is rejected – it may simply be the wrong time.
- Try and create an environment where the person has the freedom to talk or not talk, according to what they want. "I'm around all day if you fancy a chat..."

Keep the conversation going

- Sometimes it helps just to be with somebody, especially if they don't seem to want to talk.
- If they do start to talk about things that matter to them, you can encourage them by asking open-ended questions, or simply by showing that you're really listening to them.
- If you don't impose your views, they're more likely to be able to say what they want.
- Provide them with opportunities to talk about what's worrying them: turning the conversation to the future, for example.
- Be prepared that the person may want to go over what has happened, or what's worrying them, over and over again. It can be a way of coming to terms with something.

Help with practicalities

Most people who have experienced bereavement say how much they have appreciated offers of practical help. When someone has died, there are a lot of jobs to be done, including:

- Registering the will
- Finding the will
- Making funeral arrangements

In the days and weeks afterwards, there are dozens of people to contact: relatives, friends, employers, solicitor, accountant, mortgage company, pensions company, tax office, bank, utilities, social services, benefits office, clubs, etc.

These are jobs that a bereaved person may well want, or need, to do themselves. But they may want someone to be with them or be on hand to help if needed. It could be that the most useful thing you can do is provide a meal, or do some shopping, to allow them time to do them.

People usually find it easier to accept offers of help if you suggest specific tasks. Rather than saying: "Let me know if there's anything I can do", you could offer to phone people you know, sort out the flowers, or look after children or other dependents. But make sure you deliver on any promises to help.

Getting the balance right

People who have been bereaved need support from those close to them, but they may also need space. Be careful not to smother them with your sympathy, or to make them feel powerless.

It's usually a case of being observant, and being there at the right time, rather than taking over. Often the bereaved person is swept along in the days leading up to the funeral – it may be in the days and weeks after that that he or she most welcomes your offers of help and company.

Thinking longer term

Don't feel rebuffed if your offers of support are rejected at first. Try later. People have to live with grief and the consequences of bereavement for months, years. Their needs and feelings change with time. So it's important that they know they can come back to you when and if they need to.

Remember:

You can always ask for advice on what to do, or support for yourself, from people you respect and trust, or from a variety of organisations that you can find at www.dyingmatters.org

"I needed someone to tell me what to do about the funeral, how to organise a memorial service and what money I could claim"

To find out how to get more help visit www.dyingmatters.org

or call freephone 08000 21 44 66

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NATIONAL
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This is number three in a series of leaflets focusing on dying, death and bereavement produced by Dying Matters.

The National Council for Palliative Care (NCPC) is the umbrella charity for all those who are involved in providing, commissioning and using palliative care and hospice services in England, Wales & Northern Ireland.

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