

## Leaflet #4

What to do if someone you know has been bereaved

### **We think we wouldn't do it but we do**

**If a friend or acquaintance has been recently bereaved, we start to treat them differently. Sometimes we'll cross to the other side of the street to avoid having to talk to them. Or we'll delay giving them that call. Or we'll put off emailing them again and again. What do you say to someone who's just lost a partner, parent or child?**

**It's just easier to avoid. The problem is that people who have lost a loved often need lots of support - even though it doesn't look that way.**

*"There's a mountain of paperwork associated with a death and hundreds of jobs to do. The friends who keep on texting to say there is another world beyond probate, and it contains fish and chips, are doing me a great favour."*

## Showing you care

People who have been bereaved often don't want a long conversation. But they do often appreciate just knowing that you know about the death, or that you care, and that you can provide help if need be. Sometimes they'll find it easier to talk to an acquaintance than a close family member.

Here are some of the things that people who have been bereaved have said about what helps.

"I appreciated the letters people wrote, knowing that people were thinking about me and Susan who had died."

'I wanted people to say they knew what had happened, not avoid it or pretend they didn't know.'

'Sometimes I needed to be busy but other times it was great when people offered to help.'

## Where to start

- Start from the assumption that it's better to do something than nothing – to acknowledge loss rather than ignore it.
- Make a phone call, write a letter or send an email. You don't have to say much, or be clever. Making contact is the main thing.
- Accept invitations to talk from the other person. If they seem to want to talk about the person who has died, encourage them, even if it seems to make them upset.
- Listening is more important than talking. You don't have to offer solutions or explanations for anything.
- Don't be offended if your offer to talk is rejected – it may simply be the wrong time.

## Conducting the conversation

- Provide your own recollections of the person, which can help them feel more at ease talking to you.
- Words aren't always necessary, or easy. Sometimes it helps just to be with somebody, especially if they don't seem to want to talk.
- Try not to dominate the conversation, and don't push them to talk if they don't want to.

## 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.

There are some jobs that a bereaved person might well want to do themselves, or with members of their family. But they really appreciate it if friends are on hand to help them out while they are doing these jobs – by providing a meal, for example, or doing some shopping, or looking after the children for a few hours.

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 drive them to the places they need to go. But make sure you deliver on any promises to help.

*"The best friends were the ones who slipped immediately into practical mode and said: 'What can I do?' Don't be offended if your help is refused, and keep on offering."*

## **Try...**

- ... saying "I was sorry to hear about..." or "I've been thinking of you".
- ... talking about normal life as well.
- ... being honest: "I didn't know your wife, but I wish I had" (if you mean it)
- ... remembering anniversaries – the day the person died, their birthday etc.
- ... giving flowers
- ... treating them the way you always have

## **Don't...**

- ... say things that you assume, but don't know to be true. "I know you were very close to your mum" could be upsetting if the person feels guilty that she was too distant.
- ... stop inviting them to social events.
- ... come out with clichés like "I know how you feel" or "Time is a great healer"
- ... make a judgement on when they will be able to "move on": everyone grieves at their own pace.

## **Leaving the door open**

People can feel very lonely for a long time after a death, so people ringing or popping in can be very welcome – especially at weekends, when there is likely to be less sense of routine than in the week. By staying in touch, you'll be better able to judge how much support people need or want.

Don't feel upset if your offers of help or company are rejected: some people need to feel space or independence at certain times. But do keep reminding them you're there.

## 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](http://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](http://www.dyingmatters.org)

or call freephone 08000 21 44 66

THE  
NATIONAL  
COUNCIL FOR  
PALLIATIVE  
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This is number four 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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