



## HOW TO HELP A NEWLY BEREAVED PERSON

### HELPING AFTER ANY MANNER OF DEATH

*It is normal to feel some distress as you approach interacting with a grieving person:*

- Breathe deeply, steady yourself, and focus on being compassionate and giving the person your complete attention.
- Know that, even though you cannot take away their pain, your very presence—all by itself—can be comforting to them.
- Silently remind yourself that the pain of their grief is connected to their love for a person who is precious to them.

*In your first encounters with the person:*

- Express your sympathy in a sincere, straightforward way. (“I am so sorry for your loss.” “Please accept my condolences.” “You have my sympathy.”)
- Refer to the person who died by name, in keeping with your relationship with them. (“I dearly miss James.” “I’m very grateful for having known Susan.”)
- Remember, each person’s loss is unique, so saying “I understand” or comparing your or others’ losses to theirs may risk discounting the uniqueness of their loss.
- Allow the grieving person’s beliefs about death to be in the foreground by not saying things like “He is in a better place” or “God has a purpose for everything.”
- Meet the person where they are at, which means don’t assume anything about their experience, and learn directly from them what they think, feel, and believe.
- Be there for them in a way that allows them to do whatever they need to do, from sitting in silence to expressing strong emotions—and focus on *listening to them*.

*On an ongoing basis, continue doing the same as is outlined above—and also:*

- Consider being the one to make contact, while also being sensitive to their responsiveness to how much you are in touch—and to their need for solitude.
- Offer help with meals, household tasks, errands, shopping, and similar tasks, but be sensitive about not intruding—and defer to them if they don’t want help.
- Understand that this person’s way of grieving is valid. Don’t automatically apply your experience or knowledge of grief to their situation or way of doing things.
- Show that you are capable of listening wholeheartedly, with genuine interest and without judgment—then listen and listen some more.
- Invite reflections about the person’s loved one, look through photographs and memorabilia, and support them on memorial days and at remembrance activities.
- No matter how much time has passed since the death, welcome it as normal and appropriate when they express intense sadness, anger, or other emotions.
- Avoid urging the person forward. As they experience happiness, seek social outlets, or look to the future, follow their lead and join conversations they start.



## HELPING AFTER A DEATH FROM SUBSTANCE USE

A death caused by substance use—whether the manner of death is overdose, suicide, homicide, accident, or medical complication—ought to be treated the same as any other death. However, here are some things that it is helpful to know about grief after a death from substance use:

- Take the perspective that no one's death is more or less important than anyone else's and that no one's grief is more or less dire or deserving of compassion.
- Know that every person bereaved by a death from substance use has a unique and full life story that cannot be portrayed based on people's assumptions and society's stereotypes about circumstances related to this kind of death.
- Recognize that bereaved people are sometimes treated differently or even discriminated against because the person they lost died from substance use.
- Be aware of how negative reactions to this kind of death can cause the bereaved to feel isolated, and of how much your compassionate presence can mean to them.
- Think about how complicated, misunderstood, and rife with problems the dynamics of substance use and addiction can be—and how having a loved one die this way can generate many troubling questions about why this happened.
- Consider that, even though addictive disorders are recognized as diseases, judgments are often made about the deceased being responsible for their own death—causing people to feel that their grief is being discounted.
- Understand that deaths from substance use are often perceived as being preventable, which can cause bereaved people to struggle with guilt, blame, anger, and other strong emotions.
- Realize that when a person's death is preceded by a struggle with addiction, their loved ones may have experienced stress before the death that could have an impact on their grief, for example:
  - Family dynamics can include maladaptive behavior by everyone, hyper-focus on one person at a cost to others, and countless crises.
  - Caring for a person with the disease of addiction who is at risk of dying can cause the kinds of distress and losses experienced by caregivers for the chronically or terminally ill.
  - A person struggling with substance use may become estranged from the family, or their whereabouts and welfare can simply become unknowable.
- Take into account that exposure to the kinds of stressors described above and to a manner of death that is sudden and often traumatic may mean that the bereaved need extra help specifically to address their reactions to the stress and trauma they have experienced.