



GriefConnections

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Assessing the Bereaved Persons Support System

Bill Hoy, Educator and Counselor

Counselors and other caregivers who work regularly with bereaved people understand the importance of community in helping their clients work through the grief process. While personality factors and past history play important roles in accommodating the loss, the support system present for the bereaved person is vital.

A mistake frequently made by counseling professionals and volunteers, however, is assuming that a client's family and friendship circle provides support that is meaningful to the bereaved person. As any caregiving professional can attest, however, having a family or a large group of friends does not necessarily mean one has *supportive* family and friends. Even for people who have networks of people who want to be supportive, they don't always provide the kind of support that the bereaved person finds helpful.

Peer-led support groups, for example, will often inquire of newly widowed people in the group, "Do you have children close by?" When the newly bereaved person responds in the affirmative, a group member will sometimes say, "Oh, you're lucky. I don't have anyone—I'm all alone." In fact, relational conflict might make the one with children wish to be alone. In other cases, the presence of adult children is no evidence that they are providing any measure of perceived social support.

In your work with bereaved people, get beneath the labels that denote relationships we would expect to be supportive. Dr. Ken Doka has suggested we concern ourselves not only with the family but what he terms, the "circle of care." Faithful friends may be more important in the support system of your client than blood relatives are. The following questions will help understand what the words mean when your client says he or she has a supportive family or circle of friends.

Who are the people who seem most supportive to you? This question helps work past labels. Adult children, for example, might or might not be supportive to widowed parents. Rather, some adult children rush parents to "get over it" or make major decisions like selling their home. These activities may not be perceived by a bereaved person as being supportive at all. Rather, they may list as their most important support people members of the faith community or the bereavement support group the client attends.

What do they say or do that helps you feel most supported? Asking this question helps bereaved people list specific words or behaviors that they find helpful. Again, the question elicits a story and provides an opportunity for the counselor to point out efforts people are making on the bereaved person's behalf. This may also be the point at which

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the client lists some of the things people are doing that are *not* perceived as supportive. However, if the bereaved person does not list non-supportive words and behaviors, you might ask at some point. . .

What are some things you wish people would do or would not do? Learning what people are doing that is *not* supportive is as important as learning what is perceived as supportive. Well-meaning friends often use statements that are intended to communicate care but actually end up “minimizing” the loss. Statements like, “At least he isn’t suffering anymore,” “Aren’t you relieved she’s in Heaven now,” or “At least you have other children,” are intended to help—but rarely do. Frequently, widowed, able-bodied seniors are frustrated by their adult children trying to make decisions on the parent’s behalf. One group member said, “My daughter seems to forget I was paying bills before she was born; just because my husband died doesn’t mean I’ve become helpless!”

How do you think their concern for you has changed since N. died? Make sure you do not just assess the level of perceived support in the weeks immediately after the death. People who are supportive in the first few weeks often find other matters that require their attention by the end of the second month. Learn as much as you can about how your client’s support system has changed. Was it very good initially but is somewhat lacking now? If so, a bereavement support group can be an appropriate remedy.

What has surprised you the most about the way people have supported (or responded to) you? Grief is filled with surprises. Most non-bereaved people have no idea what level of pain can be experienced in the death of one’s spouse or child. But an even bigger surprise for some people is the unexpected ways family and friends do or do not come alongside the grieving. For example, your client might indicate that she was overwhelmed at the show of love evidenced by food and flowers sent for the funeral. “I never realized how many caring people we know,” a recently bereaved person might say. However, the bereaved might also be surprised by the ways people ignore them, change the subject, or constantly try to “cheer one up.” Inviting the discussion provides you with important opportunities to provide education, resources, and support of your own.

The Author: William G. (Bill) Hoy is an educator and counselor specializing in death, bereavement, and end-of-life issues. In addition to walking through significant losses of his own, Dr. Hoy has counseled grieving individuals and families for more than 25 years. He is the author of *Guiding People through Grief* and *Road to Emmaus: Pastoral Care with the Dying and Bereaved*. His newest book, *Called to Care: Navigating a Life of Care for Others* will be published later this year. He teaches in the graduate program in bereavement and leadership at Marian University and oversees the counseling program at Pathways Volunteer Hospice.

New Leaf Resources Online Videos

Carpenter’s Funeral Home in Corning, New York has an excellent online grief resource on their website. They provide online Grief videos brought to you by Sherry Williams, President and Founder of New Leaf Resources, a nationally recognized provider of grief services and counseling. The following topics are covered:

- Children and Grief
- Death of a Friend
- Does Time Heal?
- Faith and Grief
- It’s OK to Cry
- Men and Grief

New Leaf Resources Online Videos

- Physical Grief
- Surviving Firsts
- Surviving Suicide

The videos can be viewed on the website, free of charge. Go to www.carpentersfuneralhome.com and then click the Grief Videos link. (located on the left side of the screen)

The American Foundation for Suicide Prevention Survivor Outreach Program

After a suicide, those left behind often:

- wonder if there is anyone out there that understands
- need local resources for support
- want reliable information about suicide and its aftermath, but aren't sure where to find it

Through AFSP's (American Foundation for Suicide Prevention) Survivor Outreach Program, trained local volunteers are on hand to:

- meet in person with newly-bereaved survivors and their families
- listen with compassion and offer reassurance that surviving a suicide loss is possible
- recommend helpful things to read
- provide information about support groups and other local resources

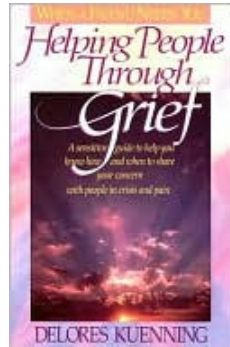
If interested in scheduling a visit, please contact Renae Carapella at 585-202-2783 or Rcarapella@afsp.org

Memorial Quote

*“The bitterest tears shed over graves are for words left unsaid
and deeds left undone.”*

Harriet Beecher Stowe

Library Notes



Helping People Through Grief

Delores Kuenning

Based on her own experience as a pastor's wife and on interviews with Christian counselors, Delores Kuenning believes that most people lack the skills needed to really help people in crisis. This book will teach you how to show care and concern during a loss or crisis and is based on true experiences dealing with issues such as death, illness, suicide and violence.

Support Groups

Loss of a Spouse Support Group

Wednesdays at 6:30 pm at Victory Highway Wesleyan Church, 150 Victory Highway, Painted Post. For more information, contact Sandi Follette at the Grief Center of The Southern Tier at 607-936-9077.

Loss of a Loved One to Suicide

First and third Thursdays of each month at 7 pm at the Hand in Hand Methodist Church on Wardell Street, Elmira. For more information, contact Sandi Follette at The Grief Center of the Southern Tier at 607-936-9077.

Compassionate Friends Support Group

Last Wednesday of each month at 7 pm at Our Saviour Lutheran Church, 2872 Westinghouse Road, Horseheads. If you are interested in joining the group, contact Joann at 562-8090 or by email at jmorgan55@stny.rr.com.

Abortion

Forgiven and Set Free—a post-abortion class. For more information contact Victory Highway Wesleyan Church at 607-962-7000.

Infant Loss

The SHARE Infant Loss Bereavement Support Group meets the third Thursday of every month at 7 pm in the Clute Education Building at Arnot Ogden Medical Center and is for parents, grandparents, family and friends of persons who have lost children through miscarriage or stillbirth. Contact Maryanne Amisano at 607-562-8856 for more information.

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