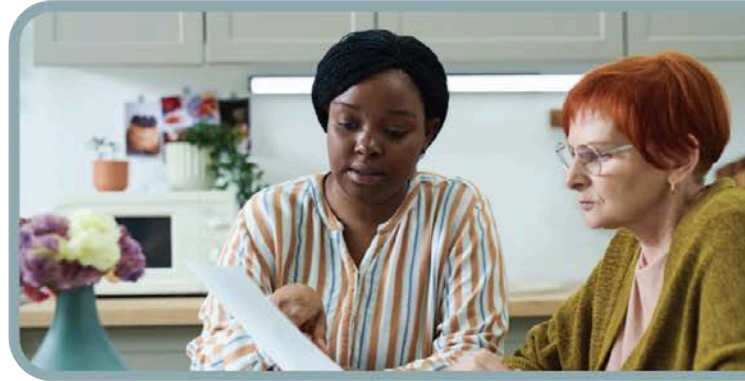


How Domestic Violence and Homeless Shelter Staff Can Support Newly Bereaved People

The death of a child is a life-altering event. Individuals who interact with bereaved parents, siblings, caregivers, and other family members in the aftermath of tragedy have a unique opportunity to provide meaningful support during this crucial time. This fact sheet provides tips for domestic violence and homeless shelter staff when connecting with newly bereaved families.



Domestic Violence and Homeless Shelter Staff Can Make All the Difference

Regardless of how or when an individual or family enters the shelter care system, their physical and emotional well-being are fragile. When a child has died, shelter staff are a vital resource in supporting children and adults navigating grief and bereavement. Your interactions will have a powerful and lasting impact on families. It is important to remember that losing a child is a profound experience, and you have a unique opportunity—and responsibility—to manage the interaction with compassion and respect. Be on the lookout for family members' preferences or unmet needs as a way to better support or care for them.

Impact of Grief on Cognition and Understanding

Grief, particularly traumatic grief such as the death of a child, significantly affects brain functioning. Newly bereaved individuals are not just sad; their ability to understand, process, and comprehend information is impaired. Oftentimes, parents or caregivers may present as confused or disorganized by not being able to access information as basic as their child's date of birth or middle name.

Practical Tips

- 1. Say the child's name.** Confirm with the family that you are saying the name correctly and ask if there is another name they would prefer you use (i.e., a nickname or other term of endearment). Using the child's name honors the child and their importance to the family.
- 2. Treat potential changes in eligibility status with compassion.** If the child's death changes the family's eligibility to reside at the shelter, communicate this clearly but not immediately. Advocate for a compassionate timeframe that allows the family to find and make alternative living arrangements, then assist them with the transition.
- 3. Support family dynamics.** Only if you are able to ensure physical and emotional safety, help identify potential family conflicts present before or after the death of the child.
- 4. Acknowledge the loss and listen.** Often siblings, regardless of the circumstances, feel personally responsible for the death. It is important to listen and help redirect siblings away from feelings of guilt and blame.
- 5. Monitor for increased substance use.** Increases in substance and alcohol misuse following a child's death are common. Identifying concerning trends is important. Finding ways to facilitate a reduction in use, or none at all, can help stem poor health outcomes.
- 6. Honor cultural and religious traditions.** Always be responsive to how cultural and religious practices might influence the grieving and mourning process. Refrain from using expressions such as "God only gives you what you can handle" or "Your child is safely in God's arms now." These platitudes imply that the child's death was given to parents or caregivers because they could weather this profound loss.

7. **Be a listener.** Giving people the space to talk (or not talk) can be a tremendous relief. No one is looking for you to “solve” their crisis or say magical words that will make them feel better. There are no magical words. Respect their story and listen with unconditional positive regard. Create a safe space for parents, caregivers, and families to express their feelings without judgment and to tell and retell their story.
8. **Serve as an advocate.** If necessary and appropriate, advocate for the family’s needs with healthcare providers, schools, or other relevant organizations, including your own.
9. **Refer to resources and support.** Provide a list of mental health professionals who have experience and expertise in grief and trauma (including providers who specialize in child and adolescent grief) and other resources families can utilize when they are ready. Most people are not ready for long-term mental health support for six to nine months following a death, but adult family members may benefit from short-term (1-3) sessions soon after the incident.
10. **Provide written materials about grief and bereavement.** Providing basic information about grief and bereavement is important so that families understand what is “normal” and what to expect.



Importance of Self-Care

Taking care of yourself is fundamental to serving yourself and your community as you cope with stress, death, and trauma. Give yourself permission to care for your own needs during difficult times.

Other Things to Keep in Mind

There are a variety of ways to offer compassion, dignity, and respect for bereaved parents, caregivers, and families. Here are a few more tips:

- **How many children do you have?** One of the most difficult questions a newly bereaved parent or caregiver will be asked is, “How many children do you have?” There is no right answer, but be prepared for them to include all of their children, whether living or dead.
- **Simple questions can be hurtful.** Common questions like, “How are you doing?” can be reframed as, “How are you coping?” to acknowledge how challenging losing a child is. It may be helpful to ask, “Could I bring you dinner this week?” or simply say, “I have been thinking of you.”
- **There are no stages of grief.** The stages of grief are a common misconception.
- **Don’t ask how the child died.** What’s important is that the child died, not how they died. Asking how they died may lead parents and caregivers to relive the most painful experience of their life.
- **All deaths are not created equal.** Resist the urge to share your experience with death. If you are a bereaved parent or caregiver, you may offer a time to visit with them privately.
- **Grief will last a long time.** Bereaved parents and caregivers will not be “feeling better” in a few weeks or even in a year. It takes many years to adjust to such profound loss; their lives are forever changed.

Resources

- **988: Free Mental Health Hotline.** If you or someone you know is in crisis, call or text 988 to be connected to crisis intervention and suicide prevention resources. Learn more at 988lifeline.org/get-help/.
- **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA)** offers information on coping with bereavement and grief, visit samhsa.gov/communities/coping-bereavement-grief.
- **Evermore** is dedicated to improving the lives of bereaved people. For more information, visit evermore.org. To access a national free Grief Support Directory, visit evermore.org/grief-support-directory.