

How Reporters, the Media, and Influencers 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 reporters, the media, and influencers when connecting with newly bereaved families.



Reporters and Media Can Make All the Difference

Giving a voice to grief is an enormous opportunity and responsibility. As such, it must be done with great care. Reporters and the media must convey facts about a significant event while also being sensitive toward the newly bereaved family.

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. Acknowledge the loss and listen.** Saying you are sorry for a family's loss and just listening to their experience is important. While reporters often have an obligation to ask difficult questions about the events that led to the child's death, remember that this has most likely been the worst event of the family's life.
- 2. Say the child's name.** Using the child's name in conversation acknowledges the importance of their life. Don't worry about reminding bereaved parents or caregivers of their child; they are thinking about them constantly. 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).
- 3. Convey and practice compassion.** Listen, be kind, and patient.
- 4. Conduct interviews with sensitivity.** Consider how your questions and responses may be received. Be mindful of the space or area in which you are conducting the interview: while a crime scene may make for great ratings, it can be devastating for the family. Ensure that no small children are in the area of the interview, as the questions and responses may be extremely upsetting and dysregulating to children who may not fully understand what is happening.
- 5. Grief impacts cognitive functioning.** Things such as short-term memory and the ability to relay an event or tell a story in an accurate order are often impacted in the immediate and short-term aftermath of a traumatic grief event. As such, try to keep questions basic and simple by not asking multiple questions at the same time. Pace your questions and speak slowly.
- 6. Honor cultural and religious traditions.** Always be responsive to how cultural and religious practices might influence the grieving and mourning process.
- 7. Avoid sensationalizing death events.** Glamorizing or elevating death events can inspire others to act. Write wisely and cautiously, limiting copycat crimes or deaths.

8. **Refrain from using “committed suicide.”** Use language such as “died by” or “died of suicide.” “Committed suicide” refers to committing a religious crime or an act against God.
9. **Seek professional development and training.** If you are reporting on traumatic or violent events, take trainings specifically focused on how to report tragic events. See the *Resources* section below for more information.

Importance of Self-Care



Reporting on events tied to human suffering takes a toll on your physical and emotional well-being. Identify strategies that help you cope with and process the distress and traumas you report. This may include getting physical exercise, spending time with people you love, engaging in activities that bring you joy, getting enough sleep, minding your alcohol or drug consumption, and drinking enough water to avoid dehydration. Give yourself permission to care for your own needs.

Other Things to Keep in Mind

There are a variety of ways to offer compassion, dignity, and respect for bereaved parents 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.
- **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.