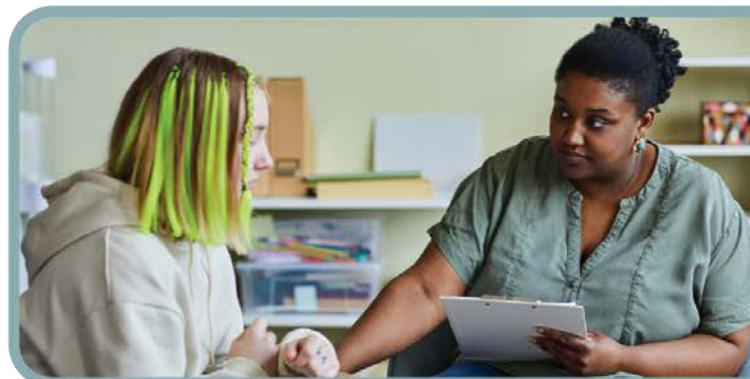


How Social Service Providers Can Support Newly Bereaved Families



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 social workers and other social service providers when connecting with newly bereaved families.



Social Workers and Social Service Providers Can Make All the Difference

Whether through hospitals, family services, community groups, or schools, social workers and other social service providers play a vital role in supporting children and adults through the grief and bereavement process after the death of a child. Your impact on how bereaved parents, caregivers, and families cope immediately and over time can be profound. Be mindful of 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.** Using the child's name in conversation acknowledges the importance of their life. Don't worry about reminding bereaved parents and 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).
- 2. Avoid religious platitudes.** Refrain from using expressions rooted in religious faith, 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 the loss.
- 3. Listen actively.** 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.
- 4. Address evolving family dynamics.** Help identify potential family conflicts that can arise from grief and facilitate communication between family members. Recognize the unique needs of siblings and provide support to help them understand and express their emotions.
- 5. Honor cultural and religious traditions.** Always be responsive to how cultural and religious practices might influence the grieving and mourning process.
- 6. Refrain from providing grief therapy, counseling, or coaching.** Only licensed grief therapists should provide short-term psychotherapy for stabilization and long-term care for functional coping and adaptive processing. Most people are not ready for long-term mental health support for six to nine months following a death.
- 7. 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.

8. **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.
9. **Serve as an advocate.** If necessary and appropriate, advocate for the family’s needs with healthcare providers, schools, or other relevant organizations.
10. **Provide community resources.** Offer practical assistance, such as helping with immediate needs for funeral arrangements or burial assistance, or coordinating with other service providers.

Importance of Self-Care



Social workers often experience a higher level of stress than many other professionals. Support may be required to cope with the continual exposure to stress, death, and trauma. Simple steps such as taking a walk, getting enough sleep, drinking water, and spending time with the people you care about can be powerful preventative acts, as can reaching out to a professional to support your mental health. Taking care of yourself is fundamental to serving your community.

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:

- **Acknowledge sibling loss and listen.** Often siblings, regardless of the circumstances, feel personally responsible for the death. Listening and orienting siblings away from feelings of guilt and blame can be helpful. Silence implies their pain and loss are not valued and may unintentionally convey that you endorse that they are responsible for the death.
- **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.

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/.
- **Mental Health America** offers resources, education, and more at mhanational.org.
- **National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI)** offers a toll-free helpline at 1-800-950-NAMI (1-800-950-6264) and provides information and resources at nami.org.
- **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.