

How Clergy, Ordained Leaders, Chaplains, and Faith Leaders 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 clergy, ordained leaders, chaplains, and faith leaders when connecting with newly bereaved families.

Clergy, Ordained Leaders, Chaplains, and Faith Leaders Can Make All The Difference

Newly bereaved families may interact with faith leaders: 1) who attend to the family at the time of a child's diagnosis, 2) who attend to the family immediately following the death of a child, or 3) who lead congregations where families or caregivers may seek support. Regardless of when faith leaders are called upon to serve, your sensitivity and guidance in these uncertain moments can have a profound impact on how bereaved parents, caregivers, and siblings cope in the short- and long-term.

Practical Tips

- 1 Avoid platitudes.** 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.
- 2 Use 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.
- 3 Memorialize the child.** When presiding over the funeral or memorial ceremony, you must spend time with the family to get to know the child. Understand what parents and caregivers most want others to know about their child—whether stories, their values, or their dreams.
- 4 Encourage storytelling.** From the beginning, storytelling begins to build the child’s legacy and creates the public narrative and perceptions of the child.
- 5 Refrain from “teaching.”** If the child died by suicide or in the commission of a crime, refrain from teaching the church’s doctrine on suicide or morality. This is a time to honor and celebrate the child’s life.
- 6 Listen without judgment.** Offering a safe space to talk (or not talk) honestly can be a tremendous relief for newly bereaved people. As parents, caregivers, or families seek answers as to why their child died, they may ask questions for which we do not know the answers, and that’s okay.
- 7 Be open to spiritual uncertainty.** It is common for bereaved parents and caregivers—even the most devout—to question and re-evaluate their spiritual and religious beliefs. While bereaved parents and caregivers know their child’s death is permanent, most seek ways to continue their connection to their child; this is normal and expected.
- 8 Foster community support.** Whether in the community or within a congregation, faith leaders are trusted authorities in lending support to families. This may include providing meals or organizing meal trains, helping with chores, hosting remembrance events, or expressing care during important holidays or events.



- 9 Preserve legacy.** Check in with the family regarding special dates or meaningful practices to help integrate their child's life into new traditions and rituals. This can include programs or practices at a faith institution or within the family itself. Preserving the child's legacy enables them to continue to be an active part of their lives.
- 10 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.



Importance of Self-Care

Professionals practicing in traumatic settings 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:

- **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.
- **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.
- **It's their story, not yours.** Being a safe place for bereaved family members to share their memories, feelings, and hardships will lend support during tender times. Always seek permission when sharing the child's and family's story.

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/.