



### What to Do . . .

*Listen:* One of the most helpful things you can do is to share the bereaved one's pain by listening. Some bereaved persons may need to talk about their loved one who has died, about the accident or illness that caused the death, or about their feelings since the death. So ask: "Would you care to talk about it?" Let them decide. Recalling when his father died, one young man said: "It really helped me when others asked what happened and then *really listened*." Listen patiently and sympathetically without necessarily feeling that you have to provide answers or solutions. Allow them to express whatever they want to share.

*Provide reassurance:* Assure them that they did all that was possible (or whatever else you know to be *true and positive*). Reassure them that what they are feeling—sadness, anger, guilt, or some other emotion—may not be at all uncommon. Tell them about others you know of who successfully recovered from a similar loss.

*Be available:* Make yourself available, not just for the first few days when many friends and relatives are present, but even months later when others have returned to their normal routine. In this way you prove yourself to be "a true companion," the kind who stands by a friend in a time of "distress." "Our friends made sure that our evenings were taken up so that we didn't have to spend too much time at home alone," explains Teresea, whose child died in a car accident. "That helped us cope with the empty feeling we had." For years afterward, anniversary dates, such as the wedding anniversary or the date of the death, can be a stressful time for the survivors. Why not mark such dates on your calendar so that when they come around, you can make yourself available, if necessary, for sympathetic support?

*Take appropriate initiative:* Are there errands that need to be run? Is someone needed to watch the children? Do visiting friends and relatives need a place to stay? Recently bereaved persons are often so stunned that they do not even know what *they* need to do, let alone tell others how they may help. So if you discern a genuine need, do not wait to be asked; take the initiative.

*Be hospitable:* Especially should we remember to be hospitable to those who are grieving. Instead of a "come anytime" invitation, set a date and time. If they refuse, do not give up too easily. Some gentle encouragement may be needed. Perhaps they declined your invitation because they are afraid of losing control of their emotions in front of others. Or they may feel guilty about enjoying a meal and fellowship at such a time.

*Be patient and understanding:* Do not be too surprised by what bereaved ones may say at first. Remember, they may be feeling angry and guilty. If emotional outbursts are directed at you, it will take insight and patience on your part not to respond with irritation.

*Write a letter:* Often overlooked is the value of a letter of condolence or a sympathy card. Its advantage? Answers Cindy, who lost her mother to cancer: "One friend wrote me a nice letter. That really helped because I could read it over and over again." Such a letter or card of encouragement may be composed "in few words," but it should give of your heart. It can say that you care and that you share a special memory about the deceased, or it can show how your life was touched by the person who died.

### What *Not* to Do . . .

*Do not keep away because you do not know what to say or do:* 'I'm sure they need to be alone right now,' we may tell ourselves. But perhaps the truth is that we are keeping away because we are afraid of saying or doing the wrong thing. However, being avoided by friends, relatives, or workmates may only make the bereaved one feel lonelier, adding to the pain. Remember, the kindest words and actions are often the simplest. Your presence alone can be a source of encouragement. Recalling the day her daughter died, Teresea says: "Within an hour, the lobby of the hospital was filled with our friends. Some of the women were in hair curlers, some were in their work clothes. They just dropped everything and came. A lot of them told us that they didn't know what to say, but it didn't matter because they were just there."

*Do not pressure them to stop grieving:* 'There, there, now, don't cry,' we may want to say. But it may be better to let the tears flow. "I think it's important to allow bereaved ones to show their emotion and really get it out," says Katherine, reflecting on her husband's death. Resist the tendency to tell others how they should feel. And do not assume that you have to hide your feelings in order to protect theirs.

*Do not be quick to advise them to discard clothing or other personal effects of the deceased before they are ready:* We may feel that it would be better for them to discard memory-evoking objects because they somehow prolong the grief. But the saying "Out of sight, out of mind" may not apply here. The bereaved person may need to let go of the deceased slowly.

*Do not necessarily avoid mentioning the departed one:* "A lot of people wouldn't even mention my son Jimmy's name or talk about him," recalls one mother. "I must admit I felt a little hurt when others did that." So do not necessarily change the subject when the deceased one's name is mentioned. Ask the person whether he needs to talk about his loved one. Some bereaved persons appreciate hearing friends tell of the special qualities that endeared the departed one to them

*Do not be too quick to say, 'It was for the best':* Trying to find something positive about the death is not always 'consoling to depressed souls' who are grieving. Recalling when her mother died, one young woman said: "Others would say, 'She's not suffering' or, 'At least she's in peace.' But I didn't want to hear that." Such comments may imply to the survivors that they should not feel sad or that the loss was not significant. However, they may be feeling very sad because they dearly miss their loved one.

*It may be better not to say, 'I know how you feel':* Do you really? For example, can you possibly know what a parent feels when a child dies if you have not experienced such a loss yourself? And even if you have, realize that others may not feel precisely as you felt. On the other hand, if it seems appropriate, there may be some benefit in telling how you recovered from the loss of your loved one. One woman whose daughter had been killed found it reassuring when the mother of another girl who had died told of her own return to normal living. She said: "The dead girl's mother didn't preface her story with 'I know how you feel.' She simply told me how things were for *her* and let me relate to them."

Helping a bereaved person calls for compassion, discernment, and much love on your part. Do not wait for the bereaved one to come to you. Do not simply say, "If there's anything I can do . . ." Find that "anything" yourself, and then take the appropriate initiative.

