

Helping a Grieving Friend during the Holidays

Each person's grief is unique. Our personal situations differ, our challenges, problems, families, religious beliefs, and relationships differ as well. We have different strengths and weaknesses. Also, quite frequently, the deaths of our loved one's are different, and the relationships we had with the deceased while living are different: conflicted, mutually supportive, ambivalent, etc.

Friends and relatives can be significant in helping someone who is grieving to get through the holidays. In the flurry of the holiday season more distant friends and acquaintances are absent, caught up in their own holiday activities; others simply acknowledge that they are not able to face the grieving person's pain in a season that is supposed to be joyful. For the person who is grieving the holidays can be particularly painful as everyone around them, the stores, television, people on the street, etc. are preparing to celebrate while they are still in mourning.

How can you help someone who is grieving a loss due to addiction, especially during the holidays? First there are a few things we need to know about grief. Grief does not go away. Rather, the bereaved gets used to living with the pain, dealing with the grief, and coping with the memory of the loved one's death. The loss, and the pain that follows, are incorporated into the bereaved's life. During the holiday season, even if the loss occurred many years ago, the grief and pain can resurface, become acute again. It is very normal to find that thoughts of the deceased, missing the deceased anew, and more actively mourning the deceased occur during the holidays.

When a loved one dies because of addiction the grief felt by friends and family is often complicated by the conflicted relationship they had with the deceased. Outsiders may find it difficult to understand how we can simultaneously both love and be angry with the deceased. When an addict dies we mourn the loss of our dreams and hopes for a better future, the future that might have been. We may also mourn the loss of the hope of being able to repair our conflicted relationship with the deceased.

The way the person died can also cause additional pain and trauma. Unfortunately, with addiction the circumstances of the death may be difficult and challenging. In addiction related deaths there may also be social stigma, many people are uncomfortable talking about the person's life style choices, family and friends may feel they have no outlet to talk about their loved one. Sometimes, as in the case with suicide for example, it may feel socially unacceptable to talk about the circumstances of the death.

Here are some suggestions for helping a grieving friend or loved one during the holidays; as was said earlier each person's grief is different, pick and choose the suggestions that seem right for you:

- One of the most important things you can do for someone who is grieving is to listen, almost every grieving person wants to talk about the loved one they lost. It is helpful to be able to talk about memories, whether good, bad or indifferent, of the deceased. Each new listener may be recounted again the events surrounding the loved one's death. This is part of the grieving process. Try to be comfortable with silences and don't feel you need to interrupt them.

- Try not to ask, "How are you?" Try to phrase the question a different way: "I've been thinking about you; what have you been doing lately?" "It's good to hear your voice; this must be a hard time for you." Try not to ask questions that call for the socially acceptable answer of, "I'm ok." Avoid saying, 'I know how you feel' or making assumptions about how someone feels.
- Be compassionate. Enter into your friend's emotions but do not try to take them away or make them your own. Allow the grieving person to experience all the hurt, sorrow and pain he/she is feeling. Tears are a normal part of grieving. Give your time, listening ear, etc. with no expectation of reciprocity; often grieving people do not have the physical or emotional energy to be outwardly grateful for your help.
- Instead of saying, "Is there anything I can do for you?" suggest something specific. "I'm going to the store, what would you like me to pick up for you." Or, "May I give you a ride to Church this week." "May I take you to lunch next Thursday?" Grieving people rarely call to ask someone other than close family members for help. They do respond to offers of a specific service with a date and time, "I'm going to be in your neighborhood tomorrow, would it be ok if I stopped by at 2:30 for about an hour?" A word of caution: while trying to create opportunities for personal interaction don't force situations on your grieving friend. Be considerate of people's need to be alone and have private time.
- Try not to offer advice unless the bereaved asks for it. Instead of saying, "Why don't you..." it is possible to speak of things using examples or in general without making the listener feel like you are telling him/her what to do.
- Try to avoid diverting a grieving person by talking on and on about what you've been doing or will be doing with your friends and family to celebrate the holidays. The bereaved often does not want to hear about all the fun and happy things you are doing. They are also usually not interested in who is ill, in the hospital, or who else has died. The grieving person is often more interested in their own loved one and their own grief.
- Attempt to understand the importance of the loss. The death of a loved one, no matter how conflicted and chaotic the relationship, is a shattering experience. As a result of the death, the bereaved's life is under reconstruction.
- Lastly, maybe send a hand written holiday letter letting them know you are thinking of them during the season. Many things can be said on paper that would be more difficult to say in person. A special card can be cherished and read over and over.

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