

COMFORTING THE BEREAVED – by *Ella Groves*
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There is mourning. There is grief. There is bereavement. They all have something in common in that they are dealing with death and loss, but mourning, grief and bereavement have degrees of differences. The following definitions will help to sort out the differences between these three phases of lose.

Mourning is the behavior that is socially prescribed following a death or in remembrance of someone who has died. Remembrance Day is a national day of mourning. There are specific rituals and services that commemorate the men and women who gave their lives in service to their country. Mourning is the time we remember and honour the four Mayorthorpe mounties who were killed in the line of duty: Const. Peter Schiemann, Const. Leo Johnston, Const. Anthony Gordon and Const. Brock Myrol. A funeral is a day of mourning and depending on the religion or culture, there are specific rituals and services that are performed to honor a person's passing.

Grief refers to the pattern of physical and emotional responses a person makes following the death of a significant person. Grief is personal and unpredictable. There is no way of preparing for the physical and emotional experience of grief or knowing what form it will take. The grief response is different for each situation, and it is difficult to predict what the reaction will be. As onlookers, we can see the grief experienced by others, but we can never know the depths of their pain. There is such a mystery in the grieving process. You can never say to a grieving person, "I know what you are going through. I know how you feel." The truth is that grief is personal, and you really cannot know what another person is experiencing at deep physical and emotional levels. Grief takes many forms - shock, disbelief, uncontrollable rage and anger and endless tears. The response to grief might be to run away or attack the person responsible for your loss or being really angry at the person who just died. Grief can be just as intense for a death that is the result of a tragic accident, a homicide or suicide as it is for an expected passing. People can suffer deep grief over the loss of a pet.

Bereavement is the state of being deprived of something that is held to be significant. It could include a child leaving home, a divorce, a change of jobs, retirement and most certainly the loss of a loved one. Bereavement is the process of grieving and making adjustments. It is rebuilding a life and adjusting to life without a loved one in it. It's the phase that comes after the funeral and after the relatives have all gone home.

Stages of Bereavement

Being with someone who is grieving is often a time when we feel awkward and uncomfortable. There is a sense of uncertainty about what to say or to what extent we should be involved, especially if the person is shutting down and withdrawing. Often we don't have a realistic picture of how long it takes a person to go through the bereavement process, and we do not recognize the various stages that the bereaved may go through.

In the booklet, *The Anatomy of Compassion* by Phyllis R. Anderson and Barbara Peterson there is an outline of seven stages of bereavement that people may experience, and they provide suggestions on how to respond at different stages of the bereavement process. It should be noted that the bereaved may not go through all the stages mentioned, nor will they go through the stages in the order in which they are presented.

The first stage is shock. The best role for the comforter is one of physical presence and permissive listening. Physical touch and a few words of repetitive reassurance are important antidotes. It is not the time to slip into advising, resorting to explanations or quoting religious clichés. A solid, stable presence is needed as the news of a death sinks in. Drinking bouts, screaming, pounding, breaking things, the need to run away or withdrawal are normal responses. As the comforter, you can reassure the person that what they feel and how they act is normal. This is the time for sending flowers and cards.

The second stage is disorganization. The grieving person seems to be out of touch with their surroundings. Confusion is a normal reaction. If ever there is a time when the comforter needs to be as stable as a rock, it is at this stage. Hugging, handholding, and touch are reassuring and grounding. It is a time for them to cry and cry, talk and talk, without interruption. It is a time to assure them that it is best not to make major decisions. During the stage of disorganization, it is best not to ask the person what you can do to help out. It is wiser to ask a family member or assess the situation yourself, step in and assist wherever there is a need. Answering the phone, making phone calls, preparing food, taking care of the children, etc.

The third stage is one of volatile emotions. Most people feel uncomfortable around anger, hurt, frustration or helplessness. The comforter should not interrupt the tirades but instead understand the feelings behind them. Do not show shock or dismay if the bereaved assigns blame or expresses anger toward the one who has died. The grieving person needs to know that they are accepted no matter what is expressed. Talking openly and quietly will help. It is not a time to resort to clichés like “time heals all wounds” or talk about God or the meaning of death. Support the person’s need to express pain, to talk about the deceased. “Telling their story” has been found to be an important need for the bereaved, as well as a healthy element in the grief process because it is one that works toward incorporating the reality of the loss.

The fourth stage is guilt. The person thinks of the good that might have been. They want a second chance. “If only I had gotten my husband to go to the doctor sooner. If only I had not let them go out that night.” Words of kindness or forgiveness will have little effect. The grieving person has a need to tell someone how badly they feel. As comforters of the bereaved, we can be compassionate listeners and know that in time their perception of their responsibility will change, and they will come to forgive themselves. During the stage of guilt, just be a compassionate listener.

Loneliness is the fifth stage. There are many reasons for loneliness setting in. An elderly person, for example, may find that most of his or her friends, neighbors and relatives have already passed over leaving them with few familiar people. A widow of a prominent person may find that the loss of her partner results in changes to her social status. For some, this is the most painful part. A person who has lost their partner may find themselves excluded from social events that revolve around couples. The full impact of the loss and the resulting loneliness are felt many months after most people think that consoling is unnecessary. The time when people send flowers, letters and cards or make phone calls has passed, but the need to connect is still there.

Sadness and depression are the natural outcomes of this sense of loss. Frequent and regular visits from a stabilizing friend becomes essential, even if it is only a temporary replacement. The ultimate goal in conquering loneliness is to build new independence or to find a new and equally stable relationship. This can take a long time and the person should not be rushed through the grieving process. We can help the those who are grieving by supporting them in their present state and not rushing them into activities or socialization. As the comforter, you can give them permission to grieve and support them in coming back.

So often the family and friends come to the home of the grieving person and want to keep the conversation light. What the person may really need is to talk about their lost loved one, to remember the happy times. You cannot initiate that level of conversation, but you can watch for clues and be ready to sit and listen at the appropriate time.

During the stage of loneliness, stick with the person. Call often. Offer to meet and go for a walk or a brief shopping trip. The distractions need to be short and small at first. Evenings and Sundays are often the loneliest times. Holidays that were family times and birthdays are difficult days to be alone.

The sixth stage is relief. In some cases, not all, there is a point of acknowledging that there is a sense of relief that a loved one is beyond the pain and suffering of this life. Feeling a sense of relief seems so callous to the grieving person that they can hardly bear to think about it. At this time, the person needs a loving listener who can listen to the frightening sense of relief without making them feel guilty or judged.

The final stage is reestablishment. This is the point where a person feels the need to enjoy life once more and to have fun while at the same time fearing it. In the stage of reestablishment, friends are paramount. Old friends need to give encouragement and permission to rejoin life. New friends can offer an opportunity to come out from under the mantle of grief. Opportunities should be offered, never forced.

One of the most important dimensions is time. Reestablishment does not arrive all at once. Each person has to go through it at their own pace. Despite the popular belief that the bereavement process is normally completed in a year, many studies show that the process can go on for twelve or thirteen years. For some it may take a lifetime.

A healthy bereavement process is expected to include recovery, an ability to reinvest in life and a sense of hopefulness. It is an adaptation to new roles and status and a completion of the acute stage of grieving. The recovered person has a sense of making it though a long struggle. It is being able once again to say 'yes' to life. There will be occasional brief periods of flashback when the old feelings are played over again. As one who comforts the bereaved, you are called upon again to give support and remind them that those are old feelings.

In conclusion, there is so much more that could be said about supporting the bereaved, but it is enough for us to be aware that the grieving person goes through many stages. There is no set time or guaranteed sequence for the stages in the journey to recovery but recognizing the stages and having a sense of how to respond at each step will help you be a more compassionate listener and an understanding supporter.

I wish that I had known about these stages years ago. I would have been more attentive to my neighbor when she lost her husband. I would have understood and been more supportive of my husband at the time of his mother's passing, and I certainly would have understood my own long and painful grieving process when my own mother passed into the Spirit World at the age of 92.

Being a Spiritualist and knowing that the soul survives death and that loved ones can communicate with us from the Spirit World was no guarantee that I would handle the loss of a loved one any better than a person who doesn't share these beliefs. I was sitting in a circle at the time of my mother's passing. Being a long-time Spiritualist, my mother looked forward to crossing over, and she wasted no time in making her presence known. One week after her passing, the medium who lead the circle saw my mother with me, and she was there at the circle every week thereafter. This didn't shorten my grieving process. I still went through all the stages of shock, disorganization, volatile emotions, guilt, loneliness, relief and reestablishment.

At a personal level, I have a better understanding of the grief and loss process. I can recognize the stages that people are going through, and I know how to be more comforting and supportive at each stage of the bereavement journey. It is my hope that in preparing this lecture, you will be more sensitive, compassionate, loving and supportive of those who grieve.

