The Aftermath
Within a few weeks, visits, cards, meals, and other special attention come to an end. Grieving people often feel alone and afraid. They may experience insomnia, fatigue, headaches, and other physical symptoms of grief. They may suffer from mood swings, restlessness, forgetfulness, and the inability to concentrate.

Their family members and friends might grow impatient and tell them: “Why can’t you pull yourself together? You aren’t acting like yourself! When are you going to get back to normal?”

What most people do not realize is that the most difficult time for a grieving person is between the fourth and the ninth month after the death. Holidays and anniversaries can be particularly painful. As special days approach, memories of past holidays surface and feelings of loss intensify.

Your presence throughout the year after the death can make a profound difference in the life of a grieving person. Here are some ways to open a conversation in the months after the death:

• **“Do you want to talk?”** Your willingness to listen — even if it is the same story over and over — is invaluable. Listen with compassion to the thoughts and fears that they may be reluctant to share with family members. Don’t be surprised at questions about God, life after death, right and wrong, and why bad things happen. Some questions you will be able to answer; others have no answer.

• **“I was thinking about …”** Let the grieving person know that you still think about their loved one. Use the person’s name when you share your thoughts and memories.

• **“Do you want to pray?”** If the idea of praying with someone seems uncomfortable, you’re not alone. Most Catholics were never trained to pray together. If you’re comfortable with spontaneous prayer, ask the Lord to help this person and invite the person to ask the Lord for what they need. Or offer to accompany the grieving person to Mass or adoration of the Blessed Sacrament.

• **“Is there something you would like me to help you do?”** Your offer to help opens the door to possibilities that may be weighing on the person’s mind. Don’t make suggestions, just assure the grieving person that you would be willing to help in any way.

The Importance of Confidentiality
When grieving people share their fears, failures, disappointments, and difficulties, they expect that you will not tell anyone else what they said. To do so would be a breach of trust and could have terrible repercussions. You will no longer be perceived as trustworthy. People will no longer seek your help or share their struggles with you.

The simple rule of thumb is: Don’t share what anyone has told you unless you have the person’s explicit permission. The only exception is if you suspect that the person needs outside intervention. For example, you might feel the need to seek help for someone if there are signs of excessive weight loss, neglecting basic self-care, the use of drugs or alcohol, or suicidal thoughts. These may be indications of clinical depression.

The End of Bereavement
Grief has no timetable. People grieve at different intensities for different lengths of time. You will know that someone is nearing the end of their bereavement when they show signs that they are adjusting to their new life.

• They begin to laugh again
• They express gratitude
• Their energy increases
• They show interest in doing things
• Their memories become comforting instead of painful
• They feel a sense of hope for the future

For Additional Information
Your Grieving Child by Bill Dodds
From Grief to Grace by Jeanne Ewing
Grieving with the Help of Your Catholic Faith by Lorene Hanley Duquin
Grieving the Loss of a Loved One: Daily Meditations by Lorene Hanley Duquin
Praying Our Goodbyes by Joyce Rupp
Grieving Together, A Couple’s Journey Through Miscarriage by Laura and Franco Fanucci

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How to Help Someone in a TIME OF LOSS

"Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” — Matthew 5:4

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S
ome people know instinctively how to help a grieving person. But for most of us, dealing with someone else’s grief is a little more uncomfortable. We might be at a loss for words. We might be uncertain about what to do. We might not know how to respond to the raw emotions a grieving person exudes. Our greatest temptation might be to avoid the person or ignore the situation. But that is the worst thing we can do.

Understanding Grief

The word “bereavement” means “to be torn apart.” It describes the deep emotional wound caused by the death of a loved one. Grief is not an illness or a disease. It is a normal human reaction to the painful void that death creates. Grief is the process by which healing takes place.

Each person experiences grief differently, but most people find themselves struggling through five key areas:
- Accepting the reality of the death
- Feeling the pain of loss
- Adjusting to life without the person
- Repositioning the person as a memory
- Finding new meaning in life

Reaching Out

There is no magic formula for dealing with a grieving person. The best way to reach out to someone will depend on your relationship with that person and where he or she is in the grieving process. And if you don’t have a close relationship with the person grieving, you still might be the first person they have seen since the news of their loss.

If the death just occurred, let the person know that it is okay to cry or to express anger or frustration. A good listener just listens.

When grieving people begin to share their story, they sometimes get emotional. Assure the person that it’s okay to cry or to express anger or frustration.

Don’t say …
- I know how you feel … You’ve got to be strong … It’s a blessing in disguise … God never gives us more than we can handle.

Instead, say …
- I can’t imagine how painful this must be … It’s okay to cry … What I’m hearing you say is … Anytime you want to talk.

Helping Children Grieve

Children grieve in different ways. Some will withdraw into themselves. Others will act out. Here are some suggestions for dealing with grieving kids of all ages:

- Let them know that you are willing to listen
- Answer questions honestly
- Admit when you don’t know the answer
- Assure children that the death was not their fault
- Allow them to cry or express angry emotions
- Help them create a memorial
- Pray with them

Offering Assistance

Immediately after a death, grieving people are often in a state of shock. They may be uncertain of what needs to be done. You can ask if they need help, perhaps in the following ways:

- Making phone calls to let family members and friends know what happened
- Shopping for food or supplies
- Preparing food
- Caring for children or pets
- Picking up family members from the airport
- Helping with arrangements for the wake, funeral, or burial
- Creating memory boards with photos for the wake
- Designing a program for the funeral Mass

The Wake

A wake allows people to pay their last respects to the deceased and to comfort the bereaved. You can help by sharing your own memories and ways that person impacted your life. These kinds of stories add to the memory bank of grieving family members.

You can also be present for prayers at the wake service or for the recitation of the Rosary or Divine Mercy Chaplet. Keep the grieving family members in your prayers.

If you are unable to attend the wake, sending a sympathy card or a Mass card with a heartfelt note can be a real consolation for the family. Some funeral homes also invite online messages.

The Funeral

Catholic funerals allow us to give the person to God with renewed hope in the resurrection of the body and eternal life. A grieving person will appreciate your presence at the funeral. You can also help by serving as a greeter and distributing funeral programs, taking part in an honor guard, or helping with the liturgy as an altar server, reader, or Eucharistic minister. Some parishes offer a funeral meal after the burial. Or you can assist at a family reception by bringing food, helping with set up and clean up, and just being available for any need that arises.

What Parishes Can Do

- Train volunteers to assist in planning a funeral.
- Arrange for an honor guard and adult altar servers at funerals.
- Organize funeral meals for the family.
- Sponsor an annual memorial Mass in November to honor those who died during the year.
- Send monthly cards or make monthly phone calls for a year after the death.
- Start a bereavement support group where grieving people can learn about the grieving process and share their experiences of grief.

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