

WHEN SOMEONE YOU LOVE DIES...



**Beaumont**

## WHEN SOMEONE YOU LOVE DIES...

*The death of a loved one can be overwhelming. In addition to coping with the emotional impact of the loss, you are confronted with the decisions and arrangements which accompany a death.*

*This booklet was prepared by the Social Work, Spiritual Care, Nursing and Patient and Family-Centered Care departments of Beaumont Hospitals to help you and your family cope with your loss.*

*The staff at Beaumont extends our condolences to you and your family at this difficult time and hope this booklet is helpful to you.*

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# TENDING TO NECESSARY DETAILS

The funeral director or cremation agency may be able to provide some guidance on some of these issues but you may also want to check with an employer, insurance, bank, etc.

- Check for pre-arranged cremation, burial and/or funeral arrangements
- Seek emergency financial aid for funeral expenses from your county's Department of Human Services
- Obtain an adequate number of certified copies of the death certificate for legal purposes
- Notify the employer, human resource and/or insurance department of the person who died
- Check on any group insurance survivor benefits, profit sharing and/or pension monies to which you may be entitled
- Check with the employer of the person who died about continuing any family medical insurance coverage provided
- Check for life insurance, accident insurance and automobile insurance and consult with someone knowledgeable about insurance
- Notify your bank and/or credit union of the death. ask about the disposition of any accounts bearing the name of the person who died, as well as any credit life insurance that may have been carried on debts (house, car, appliances, etc.)
- Check with the Veteran's Administration of your county veteran's office if the person who died was a veteran
- Check for credit cards: cancel once all charges have posted and final bills are paid
- Inquire at the local Social Security office about any benefits to which you and/or your minor children are entitled
- Check with fraternal organizations and/or labor unions of which the person who died was a member regarding any survivor benefits they may provide

- Contact an attorney for legal questions, i.e., probating the will, inheritance and estate taxes, disposition of jointly-held assets, transfer of automobile title into your name at the Secretary of State office, changes to be made in any wills or insurance policies in which the person who died was named a beneficiary, etc.
- Keep an up-to-date and accurate accounting of all cash income and expenses
- Arrange to pay all bills and taxes owed
- Draw up or update your own will and advance directive

## WHEN THE MEDICAL EXAMINER IS INVOLVED

In accordance with Michigan state law, any death which results from an accidental injury (i.e. fall, motor vehicle accident, etc.) or a death which occurs during a medical procedure is a reportable medical examiner case.

If an accident appears to have resulted in or contributed to the cause of death, Beaumont will contact the appropriate medical examiner. If after review, the medical examiner determines the case meets the criteria for autopsy, you will be notified.

For financial assistance for burial and other bereavement resources are available on the Beaumont Community Resources page [www.beaumont.org/bcrn](http://www.beaumont.org/bcrn)

# FINDING MEANING IN FAREWELL

“A covered bridge leading from light to light through a brief darkness.”

– Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

One of the first details and duties a family may face after a death is arranging for a funeral. If the death has been anticipated, pre-arrangements may have been made. However, death often comes without warning or preparation. The family suddenly is faced with making decisions to create a service of remembrance for their loved one.

The funeral offers a setting for grieving, reflecting and celebrating the life of your loved one. Although culture, faith and tradition may determine the rituals, funerals can be personal and reflect the unique life of the individual who died. The staff of the funeral home will provide valuable assistance.

The following suggestions represent the thoughts and experiences of others who have found meaning in farewell:

## FOR THE FUNERAL

- Prior to meeting with the pastor, rabbi, priest or imam who will preside at the funeral service, gather the family and any friends you would like to participate. Together, share memories, stories and any quotations or expressions that characterize the person who died. One person might write down this information. This will be a tremendous help to the minister and therapeutic to the family as well.
- When sudden death occurs, there may have been no time for a final conversation or to say goodbye. Writing a letter to the deceased that can be part of the eulogy or placed into the casket may be helpful.
- Music can be a medium for healing. Most funeral homes can arrange for special background music or a favorite song or hymn of the deceased to be part of the service.
- A collage of photographs and/or a powerpoint with photos and music will help a family remember the past, stimulating warm memories and even laughter during the visitation time.

- A symbolic statement of hope or faith can be expressed by giving a gift to those who visit or attend the funeral. A gift of a flower bulb in fall, a seed packet in spring or a tiny silk butterfly are good examples of such offerings.
- Selecting an appropriate memorial fund or charity may bring meaning in the midst of loss. The fund may represent care given to the dying or it may represent an interest or cause important to the person who died.
- For a memorial service with no body present for viewing, family or friends may wish to assemble symbols that represent the life of the one who has died. For instance, a golf club and gloves, a stack of fine books or a camera with a photograph nearby might symbolize the life and interests of an individual.

## FOR THE DAYS TO FOLLOW

- Planting a memorial tree or small perennial garden may provide a comforting and visible legacy.
- Writing stories about the life of the person who died and writing feelings about the death may give comfort and may assure their memory lives on in the future.
- Holidays and anniversaries can bring much pain. Anticipating and preparing by allowing for special remembrances or new family rituals during these times may be a comfort to the family.
- When the time is right, survivors must deal with the belongings of the one who died. Giving a select item to special friends and family members can be meaningful and memorable and can help to ease the pain of this inevitable process.



# GROWING THROUGH GRIEF

## THE GRIEVING PROCESS

The loss of a loved one has special meaning for each individual, causing us to grieve in our own personal way. Factors like culture, religion, the meaning of the relationship with the deceased or the circumstances of the death can influence the grief response. Emotional reactions can range from complete and utter despair to relief. There may be no outward displays of emotion or there may be inconsolable weeping. Each person is an expert on their own grief and there simply is no right or wrong way to grieve.

At times, we feel alone in our sorrow, as though no one else can understand. There are, however, feelings and experiences in the grieving process that many people share. The following are a few reactions to loss you may find you have in common with others:

- In the beginning, you may feel shock and confusion. Many people feel numb and have difficulty sorting through their feelings and thoughts. You may have trouble believing or accepting the death. You may hear yourself repeatedly saying, "I just can't believe it."
- People who are grieving can feel angry and irritable, sometimes lashing out at others. There may be anger toward God, the medical team, people surrounding the accident or anyone you feel could have prevented the death. This is a normal part of the grieving process.
- Self-blame or guilt may occur for those who search for ways they could have avoided the loss. Caregivers for someone who has been ill frequently feel they should have done more to prevent the person's death, often overlooking circumstances that were actually beyond their control.
- Depression or deep sadness can develop after a loss. Symptoms include a sensation of heaviness around the chest area or feeling exhausted and weak. Some people find themselves unable to concentrate, remember things, make decisions or attend to routine tasks and responsibilities. Sleep disturbances and changes in appetite are also common effects of depression. If these symptoms continue and interfere with your activities of daily living reach out to a medical or mental health provider.

- You may find yourself seeing or hearing the person who died or feeling their presence. Preoccupation with thoughts and dreams about the person you lost or about the circumstances of the death are ways of processing information and realizing what has happened.
- Many people withdraw in grief. They close themselves off from those who care about them, depriving themselves of available comfort and assistance. Isolation from others can feed into the difficult emotions of emptiness, loneliness, anger, depression and hopelessness.

## MANAGING GRIEF

Grieving is a long process that occurs over time. Past experiences you may have had with grieving may or may not be useful to you at this time. Here are a few suggestions to assist you during the early stages of grief:

### **Allow the release of emotion**

There will be triggers like thoughts, events, hugs, objects, words, sounds and smells that will stir your emotions, even when you least expect it. Give yourself permission to experience and release these waves of emotion. Crying is an example of a healthy emotional release of tension and heartache, even when it feels like you just can't stop.

### **Talk about the loss**

Let people know it's OK to talk with you about the loss. Find a patient and understanding listener who won't be critical or embarrassed about your feelings. Because everyone in the family may also be grieving, the listener may need to be a neighbor, friend, therapist or spiritual counselor. You may find it comforting to "talk" to the person you've lost when at the grave site or in a private place like your own bed at night.

### **Watch your health**

At this time of emotional and physical grieving, your body needs good nourishment. Eat balanced meals and avoid caffeine and sugar. Make and keep medical appointments. Continue or begin a health and fitness program. Rest and use familiar or new ways of relaxation.

## **Avoid the use of medication/alcohol as sedatives**

Although chemicals may provide some temporary relief, they cannot help you avoid the grief work you ultimately must do.

## **Delay major decisions**

Avoid making serious, life-changing decisions. If it can wait, you will be better equipped to make major decisions once the intensity of your grief has lessened.

## **Practice your faith**

Your religious beliefs and the people and practices involved with your faith can be a great source of healing during the difficult days ahead.

## **Accept the help of others**

Welcome the sympathy, warmth and support of others. Allow others to deal with their sorrow for you by permitting them to give their gifts of caring and support to you.

## **Review**

Recall the events and circumstances prior to and following the death. Medical staff, friends and family members who were involved with the person who died may help clarify details. Keep a record of your thoughts in a journal or record them on tape.

## **Participate in important events**

Normally joyous times like birthdays, weddings, holidays, anniversaries and celebrations of any kind may be especially difficult times to get through without your loved one. However, your participation in these events can be an important source of emotional healing for you and the people who care about you. It is ok to experience joy again following a death.

## **Restore or develop new patterns of living**

Give yourself permission to do things that give meaning, purpose and satisfaction to your life, even without your loved one. Returning to work, resuming babysitting for grandchildren, volunteering in your community, learning a new skill or joining a travel club are some examples of ways to attach yourself to meaningful patterns of living.

## Plan for special needs

Survivors often need to reassign roles and responsibilities within the family. Let others in the family and the community know what arrangements you now require. If you are now the one responsible for getting the kids to school, let your boss know you may need to adjust your schedule.

## Consider a support group

Support groups in your community for people who have experienced all kinds of losses are a valuable source of sympathetic listeners who are experiencing the same kinds of questions, emotions and experiences you are.

## Reach out for help

When you are further along, your needs and approaches to managing your grief will change. Do not allow crippling grief to continue.

Sometimes just a few sessions with a trained counselor can help you with the emotions, concerns and experiences you are going through.

If you ever feel you are in crisis, reach out to someone you trust, call a 24-hour help line or go to the nearest emergency room for help.

# HELPING CHILDREN THROUGH LOSS

Each child grieves in his own way, depending on age, circumstances, previous losses and their relationship with the person who died. Children may continue to play or go to school as if unaffected. They may experience physical problems such as headaches, stomach aches or inability to sleep. It can be difficult to know what your child is thinking and feeling, especially if they are too young to be verbal or if they tend to close themselves off from adults.

Sometimes parents want to protect children from this painful experience and may not want to include them in the grieving process. When left out, the child's uncertainty about death can lead to fantasies which tend to be much more frightening than reality. For example, one child who did not attend her uncle's funeral decided his body had been placed under her bed, causing her to refuse to sleep in her own room.

Because young children don't understand death, the best protection families can give them is information and some degree of participation in the process of farewell. The following are some special considerations:

## **Infant**

No actual understanding of death. The child may sense someone is missing and may sense distress among the members of the family. However, there is no concept of time or death.

### **Help your infant**

Meet your infant's immediate physical needs by offering plenty of close physical contact and cuddling. Do your best to keep your baby's daily routine as regular as possible.

## **Toddlers**

Do not understand the meaning of forever. Toddlers are working to figure out their world with limited verbal skills, so expect repeated questions at unexpected moments. They may ask where the loved one is, believing they will return. Toddlers might show signs of regression-clinging to important people, experiencing nightmares or having tantrums.

### **Help your toddler**

Recognize that toddlers who experience temporary regressive behavior, may just need some time. Give plenty of physical comforting contact. Toddlers typically experience separation anxiety, and this may become more noticeable after a loss. Assure your toddler of your return whenever leaving and try to keep daily routines as regular as possible.

## **Preschool**

Explanations of death can be taken quite literally. For example, "heaven" is a difficult concept to understand. One little girl, when asked how her first airplane flight went responded, "It was OK, but I searched and searched the clouds and never did see Grandma up there with the angels!" Like toddlers, the young child expects death is temporary and the person can still come back. The child may believe the dead can still eat, sleep and have birthdays. Magical thinking at this age may leave children believing unrelated events are related and blame themselves for the death. They may believe that death is contagious.

Grieving behavior may temporarily occur through a return to earlier forms of behavior, such as thumb-sucking, bed-wetting or refusing to eat.

Expressions about death generally occur through play. In an effort to understand death, the child may "play dead" or bury toys or "go away" by hiding.

## Help your preschooler

Answer questions in short, simple terms. Do not avoid the word death/dead – children think in concrete terms and will believe exactly what is said. As with younger children, do your best to keep routines as regular as possible. Allow time for play sessions in which they might express their feelings and encourage child to play and have fun. Reading books together can help with building a safe, comfortable environment.

## Six to 10 years

The child senses death is final but still does not believe death can happen to them. The child's magical thinking and fantasies about death are gradually changing. Beliefs in monsters and the "boogie man" are common and the child may be frightened by the idea of death. Because of exposure to violent deaths on TV, the child may think of the deceased in this graphic way versus reality.

At this age, children are interested in their own bodies and how they function. Death related questions may include, "Will it hurt?" or "How do you eat or sleep when you die?"

If the person who died was a parent or caregiver, the child may experience feelings of abandonment, anger or overwhelming fear of an uncertain future, including questions about who will care for them.

## Help your school-aged child

Listen to their questions carefully to understand what it is the child is asking. Children at this age will benefit from honesty and direct answers. Allow for some quiet time together where feelings are encouraged, and memories are shared. Help your child process the answers by being available and offering one-on-one time with you. Physical play can help children reduce stress. Be prepared to see mood swings and offer outlets for expression such as drawing, writing, art, music. Encourage continued schoolwork and ask for help with thank you notes or other tasks. Give choices about the child's involvement in death and mourning. Establish traditions and share memories.



## 10 to 13 years

The ability to understand and experience grief is much more developed. The child recognizes death is final, unavoidable and something they too will experience some day. Children in this age group may be more candid about their feelings regarding the death with their network of friends than with adults. Stories or jokes about death may be told by the child, usually as a way to hide their feelings. Day-dreaming can also occur as a way of working through memories, feelings, issues and worries.

The adolescent process of growing up may have previously caused conflict or emotional distance from the person who has died. Feelings of regret, guilt or self-blame due to thinking they somehow caused the death may occur. The child may long for a chance to say, "I'm sorry" and may engage in symbolic behavior to make things right, like doing the dishes without being asked.

The need to be "normal" and to regain a sense of security can lead to a swift return to familiar activities, such as school, sports and outings with friends. Others may need to be coaxed back into usual activities, with the reassurance it's okay to go on with life without the person who has died.

Expressions of grief may take the form of new or worsening behaviors that are destructive or cause concern. These can include poor school performance, isolation from friends, eating disorders, mood swings, etc. Religious teachings about death can continue to be difficult to understand or may prove to be a source of comfort.

### Help your pre-teen

Children may take "grief breaks." One minute they are grieving and the next they are playing and laughing. It can be confusing and hard for adults to understand, but this is typical and should be considered "normal." Allow your child the space to take these grief breaks without judgement. Offer physical play to help children cope. You can also help by giving the child accurate information. Children may be interested in how the person died. If the child is asking, it is ok to tell them in terms they will understand. Maintain or build new routines and rituals that involve the person the child such as reading a favorite story or listening to the person's favorite song.

## 13 to 18 years

Teenagers understand the finality of death. They may have already developed their own belief systems that may or may not align with the family's. They may express their feelings through irritability, anger or outbursts. Teens may have physical reactions like changes in sleep, upset stomach, low energy or trouble concentrating. They may act reckless or they might hide their feelings.

### Help your teen

Recognize the idea that your teen may be experiencing emotional ups and downs. Be available to listen to your teen, but do not force them to share their feelings. Your teen may begin to test boundaries, feel out of control and take more risks. Maintain family rules, routines and consequences. Like other age groups, teens may prefer creative methods of expressing their emotions such as songwriting, poetry, art. Recognize your teen may be spending more time with their peers than with the family. This is typical and if those peer relationships are healthy, should be encouraged.



# THINGS TO CONSIDER

## **Children should be allowed to attend the funeral, but should never be forced**

They should be told ahead of time what to expect. Will there be an open casket? Can they touch the body? Can they place something of value in the casket? Will there be people around who may be visibly upset?

## **Check for the child's understanding of facts and details**

Talk with the child about death according to their ability to understand, and address the questions they raise. Correct harmful distortions of the death story. For example, if the child has been told the person is "asleep," the child may be fearful of going to sleep and will need your reassurance that sleep won't cause them to die.

## **Let children know death is a natural part of life**

Help them understand all living things have a time for birth, growth and death and it was this person's time for death. Use experiences with flowers, insects and pets as examples of the cycle of life.

## **Reassure children their feelings are natural and understandable**

The child's expressions of grief may not be as visible or may be more pronounced than you would have imagined. Do not judge the child as being uncaring, ungrateful, attention seeking or manipulative. Instead, remember we all grieve differently and the child's grief experience may be unlike what you expected.

## **Balance silence and time alone with opportunities to talk and receive comfort**

Respect the child's silence or need to be alone. However, don't make silence and avoidance of the subject an expectation. Offer hugs, information and reassurance that it's okay to talk about and cry over this difficult experience with you, even if it makes you both very sad.

## **Encourage expressions of feelings and thoughts through creative energies**

Drawings, memory books with notes and pictures, poetry writing and the composition of a song are a few examples of helpful, creative outlets for children.

## **Remember most children cannot tolerate lengthy exposures to grieving**

Children may need physical outlets and time out. They may need to quickly return to their normal routines and activities so they can be like other children.

## **Recognize signs of complicated grieving**

Prolonged feelings of anger, rage, depression, guilt or fear may interfere with a healthy adjustment to loss. Look for destructive behavior or unhealthy changes in appearance, appetite, sleep patterns, school performance, involvement with friends or interest in activities.

## **If needed, get professional help**

If you are concerned about a child's reaction to a death, consult a doctor, clinical therapist or spiritual counselor. It also can be helpful to find a support group for children and families in grief.

The right professional or the right group can provide a safe place to identify grieving family patterns and issues and they can offer healing techniques for the family and the child.

## **Take care of your own needs during this difficult time**

If you become ill or are unable to function, children who are dependent on you may be affected. If you temporarily need assistance with caring for young children, find and utilize people you can trust to assist you with child care.



Though we need to weep your loss,  
You dwell in that safe place in our hearts,  
Where no storm or night or pain can reach you  
Let us not look for you only in memory,  
Where we would grow lonely without you.  
You would want us to find you in presence,  
Beside us when beauty brightens,  
When kindness glows  
And music echoes eternal tones.

On the Death of the Beloved  
John O'Donohue



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