

11-15-19 Support for the Grieving

(I am repeating a column from December of 2016, sixteen months after my son died. This is in honor of a friend who recently experienced the devastating loss of his son, his only child.)

It is not an easy task, is it? We care but we do not know what to say or do. I am offering some thoughts today based, not on research, but my own experience and observations.

If the death is recent, the person you know, the family or close friend of the deceased is in shock. They may seem to be “holding up well”. The reality probably has not sunk in. How could it? It is too much to comprehend.

When the reality does begin to show its grim face, there is most likely deep, severe anger; anger at the world, at God, at others who should have helped avoid this tragedy and even at oneself. There is a good chance there is guilt. Could something have been done differently, or better, to prevent this loss?

All this is difficult enough to experience but as the “holidays” approach, they most likely have little place in the grieving one’s heart and mind. The world keeps going while the grieving one’s life has come to a screeching halt. Rather than saying Merry Christmas or Happy Holidays, it might be a good time to send a card or leave a voice message simply saying you are thinking of them during this difficult time. All the “firsts” are excruciatingly painful, and anxiety ridden. Keep this in mind during the holidays and, if you know it, the birthday of the loved one and, of course, that date of the death. These are other opportunities for you to let your friend know you care.

Rather than ask “How are you doing?” I suggest you make statements instead. “Thinking of you.” “It’s nice to see you.” Or even a silent smile in passing is nice. The grieving person doesn’t really want to answer questions.

Offerings of meals is a good idea. A person in deep grief tends to exist in a strange, cold realm of extremes and may not even recognize time or hunger. If you want to make this offer, though, it is best to work with a close friend. Find out the food preferences and perhaps have the friend or relative be the one to store the offerings in the freezer and deliver the meal. A person in deep grief might be a recluse for a while. They might even need assistance with housework, errands or walking the dog. Again, work with someone close, a friend or relative and let that person know what you can do.

While the person you know who has suffered a horrific loss and is taking time off from work, that might be a good time to have a staff meeting and talk about ways to protect and support that co-worker. When he or she returns, that person will be attempting to keep busy and to avoid, as much as possible, thinking about the loss. Please don’t ask, “How are you doing?” (How do you think he or she is doing?) You mean well, but let the person be busy. Take your cue from his or her face and demeanor.

Also, this is a good time to discuss how the workload might be shifted. The initial grieving period turns you into a crazy person with memory lapses and difficulty concentrating.

Busy work is probably good. Social interactions can be very difficult and at times even impossible. It is easier to interact with children than with adults. Children smile and say hello. They don't ask you how you are doing. They might need your help, though, and it always feels good to help another; especially when it is easy to offer, such as a band aid or a sticker.

The grieving person has most likely received dozens, maybe a hundred cards at home and from the funeral home. If you wish to send another, I suggest sending them to the person's home rather than to the workplace. Again, I know you mean well, but that person is attempting to just function, in a dream, like a robot, while at the compartment called "work". A sympathy card at work shakes the person up and the harsh reality is there once again.

When the person returns to work, it might be good for a close co-worker to approach the topic of desk and room re-arranging. I was fortunate. My desk was in a corner, hidden by file cabinets. When someone cheerfully entered the office, who had no idea what I had experienced, and would say things like, "Hey, long time no see! What's new?" Peggy could take over and leave me out. File cabinets, screens or even a plant can serve as a shield for hiding those breakdown moments of tears and an opportunity to regain some composure.

Healing is a long way off for the person who is just returning to work. For now, it is a day-to-day, even moment-to-moment new way of existence. Your love and support are appreciated. The one who has suffered the loss isn't able to express that just yet. In retrospect, the person will know he or she was loved. Do all you can, even though it will feel insufficient, and be there for your coworker/neighbor/friend/relative.

You are, in fact, helping your friend to survive and eventually heal, to whatever extent that is possible.

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