

Caring for Bereaved Parents

By Pastor Hal Russell

[Applications can be made for all who are grieving]

Death is inevitable, but the death of a child is acutely numbing. The following are helpful reminders as you walk with someone through this kind of overwhelming hurt and loss.

1. Make your concern and love felt by your presence. After the death of a friend or family member, the tendency is to shut down and look inward. The bereaved want to be alone. Uncontrolled emotion is sometimes embarrassing, especially for men who feel that crying is not masculine. Questions bombard the mind, making conversation difficult. However, the bereaved need to have people around them, and they need to talk—even if the thoughts don't make sense. Be sensitive to the "right" times to be with them and to let them be alone.
2. Use the child's name in conversation. Even though the child has died, memories are real and alive in the parents' hearts. Sharing your memories of the child can be comforting. Thus you confirm the reality of the child's life and importance.
3. The nursery or bedroom, toys, and clothing are painful reminders of the loss of the child. It is best for the parents to put these away in their own time when they are ready to confront the loss, thus helping put closure to their experience. Help to do this may be offered, but also understanding if the parents feel this is something they need to do on their own. Some parents are unable to put things away; they leave a room as it was when the child was alive—probably out of fear of forgetting the loved one. By acknowledging that the child was real and not being afraid to talk about him or her, you reassure the parents that forgetting is impossible. Memories are healthy and should be encouraged. Putting away material reminders of the child is a positive step in grieving and starting to move forward.
4. Let your own emotions show when ministering to parents who have lost a child. Crying shows your empathy and reassures the parents it is all right to cry. Emotion reinforces the fact that the child was important to you too.
5. Avoid trivializing the death (for example, saying things like, "God needed another little flower in heaven.") The parents need help in reaching into their store of deepest heartfelt faith for answers and comfort in the following days. The support of Scripture is paramount.
6. The grieving process comes in waves—some big, some small. Like the tides, they come at different times. At first the waves are close together, but in time they get farther and farther apart. When tears come months and years after the child's death, be compassionate – let them cry and let them talk. Be a good listener. Tears are a healthy response to a devastating experience. This is not something that people just "get over". God knows the duration of the grieving process and the impact on their lives.
7. Be aware of other siblings, for they also feel the loss of their brother or sister. Young children need outlets for the emotions they feel but are unable to display. Teenagers (especially boys) may have great difficulty walking through the grieving process. Support them – be available to love and listen (but don't pressure).