

NHS Education for Scotland

Talking and being with people who are bereaved Video Script

When working in health and social care, encountering people who are bereaved is inevitable. It is important to be aware of some ways to sensitively approach these interactions; to have the confidence to talk or just listen.

Grief is a personal journey, unique to each of us.

When a person dies, those who are left can feel like their world has collapsed and that what remains is new and unfamiliar. At times they may feel alienated from people and things around them.

When encountering someone who has been bereaved, it can be difficult to know what to say and what support to offer.

A lack of confidence or fears of causing distress can lead us to avoid talking about the person who has died or to those who are grieving even when we desperately want to acknowledge their loss.

This, however, can be misunderstood as not caring and can enhance feelings of isolation.

Don't hide away from the situation out of fear or embarrassment.

Do acknowledge the person's loss and offer sympathy, even if the death was some time ago.

Preparing a sentence or two that you would feel comfortable to say ahead of time can help. This can be as simple as "I heard that Pam died. I'm so very sorry". Even just saying that you're finding it hard to know what to say is ok too.

If you are involved in the care or day to day life of a family on a more regular basis you may want to offer a little more support.

Some people find it helpful to talk about the person who has died and events surrounding their death, sometimes repeatedly. At times one member of a family may wish to speak, whereas another may not.

Don't force anyone to open up or press for details. It is not about giving advice or having answers. And try to be comfortable with any silences.

Do let them lead the conversation at their own pace.

Simply asking "Would it be helpful to talk about this now?" can be a good way to open the conversation.

People can be apprehensive to use the words dead or died. Euphemisms are often used but aren't always helpful. Where possible, mirror the words and phrases used by the person who is bereaved.

Euphemisms can be particularly confusing for children who might not understand what is meant.

Sometimes we haven't thought about how some phrases will be heard.

For example, asking "How old were they?" may be interpreted as "well, they had a good innings" which can be insensitive and sound as though the person grieving should not feel as sad as they do.

Even if you have been through something similar, try to avoid saying "I know how you feel" or "I understand". The chances are you do not.

Try not to make reference to your own thoughts, views or beliefs. By saying things as we try to be helpful it can be easy to fall into some of these pitfalls.

Around the time of a person's death, emotions and sensitivities are understandably heightened. Try to be aware of a family's feelings and accommodate their needs with compassion.

For example, attachment to the deceased person's belongings can take on more emotional significance at this time. These should be handled with the utmost care.

Don't hand possessions to the family in an unthoughtful manner.

Do handle them like precious cargo and package them appropriately.

There is no right or wrong way to grieve. It is a process not an event. People may experience a combination of powerful emotions at different times.

Over time a person may learn to live with the loss, but sadness, even if it lessens, may never completely go away.

Be aware of making assumptions about how someone is feeling based upon outward appearances. People may assure you that they are fine, but they may drop hints or show how they really feel.

Take talk of suicide very seriously, seek advice, perhaps from a senior colleague, either about what you should do or what can be done to support someone, including appropriate onward referral.

Be aware of how you can be affected by another's grief, or the death of a person who has been in your care.

It can take time and experience to build up confidence in supporting people who've been bereaved and sometimes a situation can also remind us of our own losses.

It is important to take steps to ensure you are looking after your own needs as well as those of your team.

Dealing with death and bereavement isn't easy. You may make some mistakes along the way. But listening and saying a few simple supportive words can be really comforting to someone who is grieving. Bereavement affects us all so be gentle on yourself and on those around you.