



GriefCare for Families
Module 2: Helping your family adapt after a loss
Topic 4: Strengthening relationships

Other people are important to us. Your family is very important. Your friends and others in your community are also important. Feeling a sense of matter and belonging is one of our basic human needs. You might want to think about how you can rejoin your community and what might make it easier or more difficult to do that.

In addition, other people can make a real difference in how you experience a loss. A supportive friend can help you deal with emotional pain, share memories of the person who died, and imagine a future with possibilities for happiness. A good friend can help you support your children. However, you may need to figure out who can provide support and who can't. You may need to learn what you can expect from your friends and how to help them to be as supportive as possible.

Social stress

Grief changes relationships, including the usual give and take of friendship. Social stress refers to difficulties or discomfort that you experience in social relationships. Grief can be stressful in at least three ways.

- 1) It can affect your confidence that you are being a good friend; you may feel you are not meeting expectations or not being as good a friend to others as you would like to be.
- 2) You and your friends may have trouble communicating or understanding each other; you might have trouble being open and honest with each other.
- 3) Your friends may act in ways that feel hurtful or insensitive.

If you are experiencing social stress in any of these ways, you might want to focus on ways to cope with the stress.

Your bereaved family

When someone you love dies, the death affects your whole family. Adult family members may be an important source of support for each other, or they may bring each other additional stress. Sometimes there is comfort in shared grief. Often, though, family members grieve differently. This can make it difficult to support each other. It can also be more difficult to help your child while grieving yourself. Here are some general suggestions for your grieving family.

- Understand and respect the fact that you may be grieving differently
- Don't expect too much of yourself or of your family members
- Keep communication lines open
- Share grief rituals
- Find ways to be helpful to your family members
- Find ways to allow your family members to be helpful to you

Your close friends

Close friends can be very important when you are grieving. Friends can help you manage painful emotions, honor the person who died and think about the future. They help restore your sense of belonging and matter. When you're grieving, it's important to have people who listen to you, accept your pain, and still have faith in you. Your friends can help you think about the future in a positive way.

Even with good intentions, others may stumble in trying to provide the support you need and they might be unhelpful. They may try to reassure you in ways that feel uncomfortable or try to take over and tell you what to do. Friends may ignore or avoid you, or behave like they feel sorry for you. Supporting a grieving person isn't always intuitive. When people recognize that they're not being helpful, they may keep their distance, making it worse. You might want to let them know that it's ok if they don't know what to say or do. It means a lot that they are there.

Help your friends help you

Allowing a good friend to help you when you are grieving is a gift for both of you. Helping them know how to do this is a part of your gift to them. You probably know when someone is being helpful, but you might not have thought about why it feels that way.

Expressing strong painful emotions might not be comfortable for you or your friends. Most adults are not comfortable expressing or observing strong expressions of emotions. This discomfort does not mean that emotions are negative. Nor does it mean

you should not share your feelings. You just need to be aware that neither you nor your friend may be as comfortable as usual. You need to decide who you will share your feelings with and when you will do so. In general, discussion of emotional topics needs private space and open-ended time.

Even still, as much as a grieving person needs support, it's not so easy to receive it. This can be true for your children too.

Getting involved in your community

When you are ready, you may want to find ways to get involved in your community. Everyday social interactions are important to all of us. Social relationships can feel challenging during acute grief. People or places that remind you of your loss may trigger painful grief emotions. You might also find that being with a group of familiar people has a stabilizing effect on your emotions.

Even if it feels awkward at first, being active in your community will help your family adapt to a loss. Doing this will help your children feel more comfortable. It may be difficult to interact with people who don't know about your loss, or who don't mention it. People who know about the death may seem to respond differently to you. These reactions are very common even among people who are otherwise warm-hearted. You might have some difficult experiences. Keep trying, if you can. One good way to do this is through volunteer activities. Others will feel less awkward around you as you continue to spend time with them, especially when you have a common purpose.

Reflection activity

Have you had experiences with people ignoring or avoiding you? Does this cause painful grief emotions? Do you worry about how people will react if you get emotional?