

Tool for family and friends

TOOL 9 – HOW TO SUPPORT SOMEONE WHO IS GRIEVING THE LOSS OF THEIR CHILD

A family member, friend, or colleague has lost a child and you don't know what to say or do to help them. It's a hard time for everyone and you find yourself scared of saying or doing the wrong thing. No one can take away the pain and sadness of grief, but knowing that people care is comforting and healing for grieving people.

Suggestions for things that might help

- Allow them to talk and express their loss as much as they are able but realise that sometimes they don't want to talk.
- Tell the family how sorry you are about the child's death and about the pain they must be feeling.
- Be available to listen, to run errands, to help with the other children, or whatever else seems needed at the time.
- Encourage them to be patient with themselves and not to expect too much of themselves.
- Give special attention at the funeral and in the months to come to the child's brothers and sisters, grandparents, and family (they are often in need of attention which parents may not be able to give).
- Let your genuine concern and caring show. Tell them how much you care—'I can't begin to imagine how you feel'.
- Recognise that grieving has no time limit and varies from individual to individual. Continue to support them beyond the first few months.
- Talk about your memories of the deceased child and the special qualities that made the child endearing, and remember to say the child's name.
- Acknowledge the death through visits, phone calls, sympathy cards, donations, and flowers.
- Remember important days which may be difficult for the bereaved, such as birthdays, the death anniversary, mother's day, father's day, and other significant days.
- Create opportunities for partners to have time together and time out.
- Keep calling, always leave a message and ring back. Appreciate that your bereaved relative or friend doesn't always return phone calls right away.
- Expect your relationship with the bereaved to change and grow.

Some things that may not be helpful

- Changing the subject when the family mention their child.
- Avoiding them because you are uncomfortable—being avoided by friends adds pain to an already painful experience.
- Making any comments which in any way suggest that their loss was their fault.
- Pointing out that at least they have their other children—children are not interchangeable; they cannot replace each other.
- Saying 'You should be coping or feeling better by now' or anything else which may seem judgmental about their progress in grieving.
- Saying that you know how they feel.
- Telling them not to cry. It hurts us to see them cry and makes us sad. But, by telling them not to cry, we are trying to take their grief away.
- Thinking that good news—family wedding, pregnancy, job promotion—cancels out grief.
- Having expectations for what bereaved parents should or should not be doing at different times in their grief.
- Waiting until you know the perfect thing to say. Just say whatever is in your heart or say nothing at all. Sometimes just being there is comfort enough.
- Finding yourself saying any of the following:
 - It was God's will—it was meant to be. Now you will have an angel in heaven.
 - He's in a better place now.
 - Time heals all wounds.
 - You are still young enough to have more children. At least you have other children.
 - It was for the best. It could have been worse...
 - It's been _____ (amount of time) and you have to get on with your life.
 - Everything happens for a reason.