

GRIEF HANDBOOK

INTRODUCTION

“My eyes fail from weeping, I am in torment within, my heart is poured out on the ground.” (Lamentations 2:11)

Grief can be a very intense feeling involving every part of your life. Even though it is “just a feeling,” it is as real as the floor under your feet, or the trees in the park. Grief can also be intensely painful. Grief and pain of loss occur as a result of an attachment we have for someone – a mate, relative, child, parent, friend or others. The bereavement cycle is attachment, separation and grief. Because an attachment does not occur suddenly, neither will the abatement of grief, nor that feeling of emptiness/numbness. It can take years to get over a loss and for most of us life will never ever be the same.

In Genesis we are told that God grieved, and His heart was filled with pain (Chapter 6). It states in the Gospel of John after the death of Lazarus, “Jesus wept.” Grief can not only be depression and sadness, but also anger because of feelings of desertion, or anger at God for allowing something so bad to happen, and guilt too can be a part of grief. One’s grief can be a cluster, or variety of emotions occurring all at once. No two people experience grief in the same way; each experience is unique. We all have different reactions to a loss, and no matter the age of the lost loved one, we still grieve deeply. Whether you lose a child or a grandmother, grief can be very, very painful.

Grief can be very stressful and cause physical symptoms: Insomnia, dizziness, loss of appetite, shortness of breath, trembling, irregular heart beat. But...it is easier to bear with the love and support of friends, family and church groups. Talking, listening and just being there doesn’t take away grief, but it is healing and can make grief bearable.

Grief and grieving are mentioned in both the Old and New Testaments. Many of the Psalms, the Book of Jeremiah and Lamentations contain verses about individual and community grieving. Whether we admit it or not, we all love to control and manage most things in our lives: Bills, our health, relationships, children, where we live, etc. But grief is not something that can be controlled, or managed. Out of nowhere, it sweeps down on us like a cold wind. And, it comes and goes as it pleases.

FAITH

“There’s a hole in the world in the place where he was. Now there is nothing.” This was written by a man of faith who had lost his son in a mountain climbing accident. Although the man was suffering terribly, his faith gave him strength to survive. And it is by faith that we know and believe that God is sovereign and that we are in His Hands. This is a joy and a blessing. To believe and be committed to Jesus Christ, the author and perfecter of our faith, is essential for our survival during times of loss. The fact that we suffer during and after a loss does not mean we lack faith. It is natural to grieve. Paul’s statement in 1 Thessalonians 4:13 doesn’t say we don’t grieve, but that we grieve with the hope of salvation. Suffering and sadness are going to happen, but **we** have a place prepared for us. We know the rest of the story. We are strengthened and comforted by a loving God.

GRIEVING

Again, it is important to remember that each person grieves differently. Grieving is a process that will vary from person to person, male to female, age to age. In Billy Graham's book titled **Nearing Home**, Dr. Graham talks about the loss of his wife Ruth and offers the following advice on dealing with grief:

- Grief is natural/normal before, during and following a loss. Don't be ambushed by it, don't deny it and don't feel guilty, thinking "I shouldn't feel this way." Grieving is a process. It doesn't go away overnight and never goes completely away. You just learn how to manage it.
- You may feel numbness at first, then anger, pain, depression, sadness, guilt, and loneliness. There can be a long list with different mixes of emotions that come into play.
- Look ahead to your future. Make plans. Stay active. Let your grief be your companion. Remember, God is not finished with you yet. There are people who still need us, still love us. We must continue to make a difference in the lives of others. We need to remind ourselves that everyone you meet will be carrying some kind of a burden. Paul wrote in Galatians 6:2, "*Carry each other's burdens and in this way you will fulfill the Law of Christ.*" All around you will be people with troubles/burdens and God can use your experience to encourage them, to help them. And when we reach out to others, taking their burdens on as ours, we draw attention away from our own burdens.
- There will be a lot of things to do after the loss of a loved one. Arrangements, errands, notes to get out, forms and physical work as things are cleaned out and re-arranged. Some of it will not be pleasant, but it will occupy your time and serve as a distraction.
- Go to God with your grief. He knows what you are experiencing. He watched His own son being tortured and put to death. The Lord also grieved over those in the days of Noah.

*So do not fear, for I am with you;
Do not be dismayed, for I am your God.
I will strengthen you and help you;
I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.
(Isaiah 41:10)*

- Finally, count your blessings, turn daily to the Word and remember His promises.

For a Christian, death marks the completion of a journey and the beginning of a new life. Funeral or Memorial Services celebrate and honor the legacies of our loved ones, knowing that the deceased, if they are Christian, is with his/her Lord. Whether death occurs after a long illness or quite suddenly, it's still shocking. Even with a long illness and after having said "good bye," or "I love you," or "I forgive you," the loss can be devastating. And for some, it can go on for an extended period. The reality for those left behind is sadness, pain and sometimes depression.

Someone once asked a man who had lost his 6-year-old daughter years earlier when the pain had stopped. His response was, "it didn't and it never will." It might be a sound, a smell or a song, but the memories can come flooding back and be overwhelming years after the loss.

WHAT YOU CAN DO PERSONALLY TO MINISTER TO THOSE WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED THE LOSS OF A LOVED ONE.

We **cannot** rescue, but we **can** listen, pray for and with, and help accomplish tasks at hand. We should help those who have lost loved ones to feel and rely more on the comfort of our presence, with less emphasis on the comfort of our words.

- Pray – pray for and with, especially with.
- Listen – listen with your ears, your eyes and your heart. Lady Bird Johnson once wrote, "People must be given the opportunity to hurt out loud."
- Love – be a loving companion.

- Sincerely Care – be aware and warn against destructive behaviors, e.g., drinking, overworking, over or under eating. Be aware of any new physical problems like anxiety, fatigue, etc.
- Comfort – acknowledge the secondary losses -- partner, friend, companion, accountant and others.
- If appropriate, get the person to talk about his or her loved one: how did you meet, what sports did they like and what hobbies did they have? There can also be questions relating to pictures in the home, etc.
- After the funeral, be sure and continue praying, calling and visiting, as well as inviting them out. Many people do just fine, until all the activities stop. When it gets quiet and people start reflecting, then things can get really sad.
- Encourage and allow the bereaved to say “no” when asked to do something they do not want to do.
- Encourage them to do what they want to do.
- Encourage them to exercise and eat well.
- Encourage them to write down the pros and cons of important decisions.
- Make a list for the bereaved of things that need to be done and help with the prioritization and/or delegation of items to accomplish the list, if they are agreeable.
- Allow the person to work through the bereavement process at his or her own pace and in his or her own way. Be careful of using the words “should” and “shouldn’t.”
- Use common sense and be sensitive in helping and deciding what to suggest. What may be “pushy” to one person may be desperately needed for another.

WHAT YOU SHOULD NOT DO

- Don’t tell people to be strong and not cry. (John 11:35)
- Don’t think that grieving shows a lack of faith. (Genesis 6:6)
- Please don’t think it’s God’s Will, or God’s Plan. Trying to make sense out of a tragedy is often impossible. Saying it’s God’s Will is not a good plan on our part. We cannot possibly understand God’s Will or Plans, but we do know several things about God -- He loves us perfectly and He grieves with us as we suffer.
- Don’t tell people you know exactly how they feel.
- Don’t tell people that it’s all in their heads.
- Know that God gave us tears and they are a very important part of the healing process. Don’t be uncomfortable during or with this process.

WHAT YOU CAN DO AS A BIBLE FELLOWSHIP CLASS

- You can call and visit at the home.
- You can take food, flowers, stamps, thank you cards or send cards.
- If you are organizing the class to provide food (certain members covering certain days), be sure to:
 1. Call to determine if it’s OK.
 2. Determine the number of people to be served.
 3. Determine the days of coverage.
 4. Also consider the fact that there are comfort foods proven to be more popular over the years such as casseroles, chicken, ham, vegetables and desserts to name a few. Spicy dishes and salads are not as popular and digestible.
 5. Keep a record of who helped and who brought what so “thank you” notes can be sent.
 - If your group is house sitting during the services, or there in some other way to help the bereaved, you can assist by coordinating the food and its arrangement, calling friends and relatives, handling or helping to handle funeral arrangements, running errands, loving/caring and picking up family members from the airport, etc.
 - Offer to stay at the house during the funeral for both security reasons and helping with food preparation for the return of the family.
- If the family meal is served at the church, your Bible Fellowship class needs to bring food and help serve the family. The church will provide the meat (usually ham), the rolls, coffee, tea, paper or plastic plates, cups and utensils. The Bereavement team will help host, set-up and clean-up. A member of your ABF will coordinate the delivery of the food and communicate with the Heights’ Bereavement Minister. The ABF coordinator will ensure that dishes are prepared serving 10 to 12 and that the appropriate vegetables, desserts, salads, etc are provided. Please contact our Administrative Receptionist at 972.238.7243, so this need can be met.
- Offer to help write or mail “thank you” cards. The bereaved may want to write something on a card for the whole class.

IF YOU HAVE EXPERIENCED A LOSS, WHAT IS IT LIKE? WHAT IS GOOD/RIGHT AND WHAT IS BAD/WRONG?

The following are results from survey questions to members at The Heights who had recently lost loved ones. The responses are in composite form.

1. WHAT WERE THE MOST HELPFUL THINGS SOMEONE DID FOR YOU AT THE TIME OF YOUR LOSS?

Meals and food were the most frequent responses. "There are so many things to do and you just don't have the energy and focus". "Just having someone there and having them say, 'I'm so sorry' meant so much." "Taking care of medical paperwork, even helping with expenses." "In addition to food, someone thought to bring toilet paper. With an influx of visitors, that turned out to be helpful. Someone else took my daughter to buy an appropriate dress for the funeral and took my mother-in-law to get her hair done. Those were practical things that took place within 2 days. Later the most helpful thing was assisting with my children. My children were young and wanted to continue all of their activities. I didn't always have the energy, but there were friends who made it 'their job' to pick them up and take them, so they were able to maintain their routines."

2. WHAT WERE SOME OF THE LEAST HELPFUL, MAYBE EVEN FRUSTRATING?

"Going away after a visit and not coming back or calling." "Avoiding me and avoiding talking about my loss." "Asking too many really personal and financial questions."

3. DID SOMEONE, WHILE MEANING WELL, DO SOMETHING THAT HURT YOU?

"Saying it was God's Will that my loss occurred." "Not calling or wanting to talk about anything meaningful."

4. WAS THERE A REALLY CRITICAL PERIOD IN YOUR GRIEVING PROCESS, A TIME WHEN YOU REALLY NEEDED THE RIGHT KIND OF HELP?

"It took a whole year for me to get my feet on the ground." "Right after the funeral I realized that I was all alone and that it was up to me to finish raising our children. It was one of the loneliest times of my life." "Right after my loss, I was really depressed. Going back to work and staying busy helped." "I would say it is important to check in about a month after the funeral, after the out-of-town guests have gone home, the kids are back in school and reality starts to set in."

5. DID YOU FEEL THOSE AROUND YOU UNDERSTOOD WHAT YOU WERE GOING THROUGH?

The answers were both yes and no. Yes, "through the cards, food, flowers and telephone calls." "There were people who encouraged me, made wonderful comments expressing love and care." "In the midst of my grief there were people who could make me laugh and help me forget just a little." Some responses were "no." "There were only a few people who I felt had any idea of what I was going through."

6. DID YOU FEEL THERE WERE THOSE WHO DID NOT? WHAT WERE THEIR REACTIONS?

"Yes, they were at a loss also." "Our friends were too young, they just avoided me." Avoidance seemed to be the most common response.

7. WHAT WOULD YOU HAVE LIKED SOMEONE TO DO?

"Just be there." "Visit and call." "Listen." "Listening is the most important thing. You may have to hear the story over and over, but it is so valuable to the person telling it. I was always worried that I was going to 'use up' my friends who listened."

8. WHAT WOULD HAVE BEEN THE MOST MEANINGFUL?

"Ask me to go out." "Ask me to a party, or just come by to visit." "Attending the funeral service." "God had been preparing my children and me for some time. It was not easy, but with the prayers, love and support of our church, we felt a real peace about everything." "One thing that would have taken a big commitment would have been for a man to be a mentor to my son. Since I did not have family in the area, it would have been nice for someone to do 'guy things' with him; but it would do more harm than good if the commitment wasn't long-term."

9. WHEN WOULD HAVE BEEN THE BEST TIME TO DO THIS?

“Staying close after the funeral.” “The church does a wonderful job in the days immediately after a death. Where we seem to fall short is in the long- term checking on people later. We all live such busy lives.” “It was about 3 weeks after the death that I really got sad and lonely.” “Grief goes on much longer than most people think. There is no magic moment when it’s over. Keeping in touch every few weeks or so shows that you are really in for the long haul.”

10. ADDITIONAL THOUGHTS

We are most fortunate to have a wonderful library at The Heights. Our Librarian and other volunteers are available to assist you in checking out books that have been ordered especially to support the Bereavement Ministry. Our library is located on the second floor across from the Children’s Ministry entrance. Most books can be found in the 200s, but a few are in other areas and can be quickly located with a keyword search on the card catalog software or by a volunteer at the Circulation Desk. Please take advantage of this resource and don’t forget the city library.