

LIVING THROUGH LOSS COUNSELLING SOCIETY OF BC

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GRIEF AND THE INTELLECTUALLY CHALLENGED

Helping Intellectually Challenged Adults Grieve:

1) **Tell the person that the death has occurred:** Adults with intellectual challenges should be told about death because it provides them with an opportunity to learn about life and death events that affect them. Much like children, these adults will know that something is wrong whether they are told or not. Also they will be better able to cope with other losses if they learn about death in a direct way.

2) **Allow and encourage the person to share feelings:** Some care providers are surprised or upset by the intensity of the emotion that is initially expressed. They may try to prevent a strong show of emotion. Although it is hard to watch someone grieve, open expressions of grief will help the person recover. Some adults have the opposite response and seem quite calm; they do not talk about the death. Be aware that they may not fully realize the impact of death; it may take several months to feel the loss. Research indicates that these adults may benefit by having someone initiate the conversation about the death.

3) **Provide reassurance that they are not alone:** As a helper, you can learn to comfort someone who is experiencing emotional pain. You are not expected to solve the problem. You can be there so that the adult knows he/she is not alone. It may help to spend some time helping the bereaved person identify people to whom he/she might turn to for help.

4) **Be patient with the grieving person:** Grieving people often need to tell and retell stories about their relationship with the deceased. Understanding that grief takes time and “retelling” is a normal part of grieving can help the intellectually challenged adult accept the reality of the loss.

5) **Learn from the person who is grieving:** Learning to “walk beside” the person who is grieving is the most important way to help the bereaved individual. Everyone’s experience of grief is unique. You can learn to help the person by watching and listening to the person closely.

Vignette: A man at least 10 years after the death of his mother, wanted to “buy her a rose”. The staff person whom he asked for help was concerned about his seemingly bizarre behavior. As she talked with him further, she learned that roses had been his mother’s favorite flowers; he wanted to place a rose on her grave for mother’s day. He had waited 10 years for someone to understand and help him.