

LIVING THROUGH LOSS COUNSELLING SOCIETY OF BC

#201 – 1847 West Broadway

Vancouver, BC V6J 1Y6

Fax: 604-873-5002

PHONE: 604-873-5013

Email: ltlc@sprint.ca

STRATEGIES TO ASSIST INTELLECTUALLY CHALLENGED ADULTS WITH GRIEF

This section is *not* a grief therapy manual nor a recipe for how to help someone grieve. Some of the suggestions below may assist the helper in finding strategies, which may be relevant to the bereaved person with whom you are interacting. Remember to:

- Use your knowledge of the person to help you identify strategies that might be helpful
- Use your creativity, experiment with new approaches
- Know your own grief triggers
- It is not unusual for the bereaved person initially to look or act more upset than previously.

Task I. Accepting the Reality of the Loss:

1) Help the person identify and stay overnight in a location that provides the most comfort during the days surrounding the death. If possible allow the bereaved person to choose where they will stay. Intellectually challenged adults may cope better if they are not excluded from the family's interaction at this time.

2) Speak to the person about the death in an open and direct way.

3) Utilize physical contact as in holding someone's hand or touching his or her shoulder if appropriate.

4) Involve the person in funeral arrangements; flowers they would like to have; what they will wear, explain what is going to happen;

5) Give them a choice (but do not force) to attend or not attend the funeral, wake or memorial service.

6) Utilizing tangible objects and the sense of touch can be important for people with severe disabilities. Suggest that a portion of the funeral or memorial service include things that can be heard, smelled, touched, or even eaten.

7) Offer the opportunity to add something personally meaningful to the funeral or memorial service to honor the person who died. For example, the creation of a collage of photographs depicting the deceased at different stages of his/her life could be displayed at the service.

8) Videotape or audiotape the funeral or memorial service. There may be reasons, which prevent a person from attending the funeral. Discretion should be used when videotaping a funeral and members of the family and clergy must agree. As well, care must be taken as to how the video will be presented to the bereaved person.

9) Help the person maintain his/her usual routine. This provides a sense of safety and security while the bereaved person experiences their grief. Help the bereaved to understand that it is not disrespectful to continue with usual activity following the death.

10) Use teaching to help explain death. There is a greater chance that a person with developmental disabilities will understand about death if multiple means are used to explain it. Concrete examples along with words can be of great help.

Buy a bottle of children's bubble mixture. Blow Bubbles, catch one. Have the person do the same thing. Ask them if they can see the bubble. Next ask them to burst it. Ask the person if they can still see the bubble. When the person acknowledges that the bubble can no longer be seen, ask if they can feel it. It will feel wet in the person's hand. Help him to understand that this is like someone's death.

Teach people about heartbeats. They can put their hands over their own hearts and feel the beat, they can feel someone else's heart beat, and they can feel that inanimate objects do not have a heartbeat. This can help them to understand that death means that the body stops working, the heart stops beating.

Asking someone to draw a picture of what they think happens when someone dies can help caregivers understand a person's inner picture of death.

Tasks II. To Experience the Pain of Grief

1) Be there for the person who is experiencing the loss. Try to build a safe and trusting relationship with the person. Sit close to them when you are with them. Use your body to indicate that you are listening. If appropriate, touch the person you are with. If the person is in a wheel chair, kneel down so you are at the same level.

2) If you are grieving also, allow the person to see you grieve and talk about it with them. Reassure the person that he/she is not the cause of your grief; let him/her know that sadness, crying, and anger is "normal" grief response. Allow the grieving person to be part of the helping process by including them in tasks like bringing someone a drink or tissue or offering a pat on the shoulder.

3) Use books that can help you to explain the concept of death and the grieving process. Some children's books may be the best resource, however, be careful to choose only those books that are appropriate for an adult to read.

4) Use a visual aid to help the person identify how he/she is feeling. A visual aide can be drawing, photographs, or pictures cut from magazines, which depict many of the different emotions connected to grief.

5) Acknowledge the person's feelings. Avoid telling the person how to feel. Try using empathic statements when you observe a behavior or expression, which might be connected to the grief.

6) Allow and encourage the appropriate expression of anger. Steer the person to appropriate behaviors, and teach them acceptable places and times to express their anger. Being aware of anger management techniques is important. Physical exercise and sports are a healthy outlet for anger as is beating a pillow, pounding clay, drawing an angry picture, shredding paper, or working in the garden.

7) Encourage the bereaved person to draw a picture depicting how they are feeling. Encourage them to explain what their picture means rather than interpreting it for them.

8) Use a slogan to help the person cope. The phrase should be an affirmation such as “I will be OK” or “I can do this”. Have them chant this slogan, write it down and/or carry it with them.

9) Utilize a teddy bear that plays musical tapes. Some bereaved adults find the combination of the music and softness of the bear to be comforting.

10) Draw or provide a body map. Invite the person to color or fill in the body so it looks like how he/she feels inside. Ask the person why they used certain colors and why in certain areas of the body. These drawings can be kept and the exercise can be repeated throughout the grieving process. The drawings can be used to show the person that he/she has changed.

11) Identify a prayer, poem, scripture selection, or song whose words might bring comfort and meaning to the bereaved individual.

12) Help the bereaved person purchase or compile an audiotape of favorite music that will comfort them. Music and musical instruments can assist a person in expressing strong emotions such as sadness and anger. Some people who have not had the chance to say goodbye can do this by putting together a tape of music that expresses the thoughts, words and feelings that they would have liked the deceased to hear. Music can also be used to help a person cope and move on in life.

13) Being in Nature can be healing in and of itself. Sometimes it can be difficult to share thoughts and emotions while sitting in a room. Consider walking with the person in an enjoyable location. Often sitting or being near a lake, pond, stream or ocean can be soothing. Spending time on or near water often releases someone’s inner thoughts and feelings. Releasing a message which contains personal thoughts, feelings, or memories and watching it drift away can help lighten some of the emotional turmoil that is felt after a death. Visiting a special place that the grieving person shared with the deceased can release stories and memories.

14) Help a person live on day at a time, planning especially for times of day that might be particularly difficult. Life can seem very frightening and lonely when a parent or caregiver dies. Help the person to understand that on someday, he/she may feel sad or angry and on other day feel OK. Help him/her write out plans and schedules for the day. Times of the day, week, or month that were spent with the deceased may be particularly difficult times. Help the person decide how best to spend these times. This also applies to anniversaries and other special days.

15) Teach the person simple breathing techniques and relaxation exercises to help cope with anger, anxiety or panic attacks. You can also use relaxation tapes to help those who have problems sleeping.

16) Help the person get in touch with feelings about death by having a discussion using one or more of the following statements:

Sometimes I wish that...
When I'm alone I ...
If I could change anything, I ...
The thing I missed most about my ...
I'm happy that ...
I look forward to the future because ...

17) Be sure to follow-up and check-in at regular intervals with the bereaved person. In general people do not talk about a death or how they are coping after the funeral occurs. They may be having a difficult time coping and could be in need of the support of others. The grief process and its length vary for each person. Staying in touch with where a person is in their grief is very important.

Task III. To Adjust to an Environment where the Deceased is Missing

- 1) Help the person identify others who will provide support for him/her. Family members, friends, and staff can offer support on difficult days. Using visual expression such as a diagram depicting the bereaved person in the middle of the page with the names of people to whom they can turn to for help placed around the picture reinforces the feeling that the bereaved person is not alone.
- 2) Consider the possibility of a grief support group if the person has verbal abilities, enjoys being a member of a group, and is capable of listening and interacting with others.
- 3) Help the bereaved person obtain an item that belonged to the deceased individual. Allow them to choose an item that is meaningful.
- 4) Create a memory book of photographs, which are of significance to the bereaved person. The content can vary according to the individual.
- 5) Use candles on anniversary dates as a way to honor and symbolically remember a loved one who has died.
- 6) Help the person keep a journal. If writing abilities are difficult for the person, then a staff or family member can assist in this task. The journal could begin with the following words: "This is my journal which is for helping me to understand how to accept a loss of life, how to live with it, and how to keep surviving and going on with my life."
- 7) Set aside time to talk with the person about life in the past, comparing and contrasting it with life currently. Acknowledge the changes that have occurred and the emotions that accompany change.
- 8) Create a story-telling circle. Invite family, friends who knew the deceased to participate to come and share their stories.

9) Focus on a person's strengths, competence and abilities. Assist them in learning new skills, which will foster a sense of independence and control. Do not expect that the person will be able to learn new skills immediately, this especially true during the early stages of grief.

10) Use a timeline to help a person *see* their lives, *hear* about their lives, and review how they *felt* at different times during their lives. Using a large piece of paper or a piece of yarn, words, pictures, and other objects can be attached to the timeline, which mark significant life events and changes. Encourage the person to tell his/her story and to share memories, emotions and thoughts regarding various events.

Task IV. Withdraw Emotional Energy

1) Plant a tree or other vegetation in honor of the loved one who has died. Explain the meaning behind a memorial as a way to remember the deceased.

2) Look for opportunities where the grieving person can help others. After the person has gone through the initial stages of grief, help the person to focus on his/her own abilities rather than losses while encouraging to help others.

3) Encourage the person to choose and engage in a new leisure activity. Try to establish a regular schedule for the person to try this activity and identify someone who will do the activity with the person.

4) Help the person to create and/or utilize a calendar as a way to look forward to upcoming events. If there is a month where special event are missing, help the person decide what they might do to fill in their time.

5) Encourage peer interactions around the subject of change, loss of death. Use resources from hospices and grief counseling centers to help determine topics for discussion