

## WHEN A CO-WORKER IS GRIEVING

In October of 1985, after the death of our son, Brendan, my co-workers tried so hard to “make it better” for me. It seemed as though they were walking on eggshells every time I was around; afraid they might say or do the wrong thing. I appreciated it most when they shared their helplessness with me by merely saying, “I’m so sorry for your loss. I don’t know what to say to you.” Some tried to protect me by not mentioning Brendan at all, as if he never lived, never mattered – at least that is how I interpreted their silence. I wanted to scream at the top of my lungs, “He was special! He was important! He MATTERED!” All I wanted to do was talk about his life, his death and how we would ever survive this tragic loss. They were uncomfortable with my tears, withdrawal, and overwhelming sadness. At times, I found myself comforting them and strangely enough it was at some level helpful because it provided me the opportunity to avoid my own grief.

Sometimes, and without malice, people say things out of their own helplessness that they think may help us with our grief, but may feel hurtful and insensitive to a grieving parent. Phrases like, “You’re young, you’ll have another” or “Thank goodness he wasn’t older, then you would *really* be attached to him” or even “I know just how you feel” are meant to be helpful, but will probably be interpreted as unfeeling or cruel. It is my belief that because every one grieves differently, even other bereaved parents cannot know how another bereaved parent may feel about their loss. While allowing the grieving parent the opportunity to speak freely about their child may be uncomfortable for friends and co-workers to hear, ultimately, it is what is needed for the bereaved to move along in their grieving process.

What follows are some suggestions for friends and co-workers of grieving parents:

- Always refer to the child by their name. It is very important.
- Sharing memories of their child with them is a beautiful way of letting them know how special their child is.
- Allow grieving parents their own timetable for grieving. There is no “cookbook recipe” that will move the grieving process along any faster.
- Get in touch either by phone, letters, email or visits. Keep it brief initially. Say little on early visits. “I’m sorry for your loss” is appropriate.
- Avoid the urge to “fix it” or “make it better”.
- Remember the family on the child’s birthday, anniversary, Mother’s Day, Father’s Day...etc.



- Help with practical matters. Do they need you to answer the phone, prepare meals, do laundry, provide childcare?
- Encourage others to visit or help.
- Accept silence. Be a good listener.
- Don't probe for details about the death. Listen with understanding if they offer information.
- Allow the working through of grief. Don't remove the child's belongings (clothing, photo's, bottles, crib, etc) unless parents ask.
- Write a letter to the grieving parents.
- Upon their return to work, treat them as a normal person.
- Don't forget the father. Many times people ask the mother how the mother is doing, but neglect to ask the father how HE is doing.
- Remember the forgotten grievers; grandparents, siblings, childcare providers.
- Don't avoid the parents because you are uncomfortable. It can add to an already painful situation.
- Don't avoid mentioning the child's name for fear of reminding them of their loss. They haven't forgotten.
- Don't give advice about what the grieving parents should do or feel.
- Don't assume the grieving is over in a few weeks or months. They will never stop grieving the death of their child and will need your support indefinitely.
- Don't try to find something positive, such as a moral lesson, to explain the child's death.

There are many other ways to show grieving parents how much you care. Even the smallest act or gesture of kindness will truly be appreciated. Simply by communicating your caring and being yourself, you will be helping the bereaved to cope with their grief.

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