

Practical and Pastoral Responses to Grief and Loss

Pastoral care is vitally important to those who are bereaved, and understanding the huge impact that the loss of a loved one can have upon a person must never be underestimated. Jesus himself came to walk with two disciples on the road to Emmaus after they had seen Jesus crucified in front of them. As he walked and talked with these disciples, Jesus did not pull them along nor did he push them to somewhere they did not want to go. Instead Jesus simply walked beside them, listening, caring and showing a level of pastoral care that we can learn much from. His gentle questions, with no other agenda, simply allowed them a moment to explore their feelings and emotions. This can be found in Luke 24:13-16.



Each year there are approximately 600,000 deaths in the UK leaving over six million people bereaved of loved ones. In our corps/churches and communities, there is a need to understand the importance of our pastoral care to bereaved people, and to accept that we are not going to 'fix' someone's grief and loss, but we may be able to offer support and learn what might be helpful and also unhelpful at such a crucial time in someone's life.

Sadly, people may say and do unhelpful things when others are experiencing grief and loss. Therefore, acknowledging that we may not always have all the answers is the first step to good pastoral care of the bereaved. There are two specific helpful organisations which provide specialised training which we would recommend for leaders and pastoral carers:

- **The Bereavement Friendly Church Training** by Loss and Hope helps churches to understand grief and loss and move towards being more bereavement friendly for those living with grief, whether that has been ongoing for many years or a recent bereavement.
www.lossandhope.org/whats-on-offer/becoming-bereavement-friendly/
- **Cruse Bereavement Support** offers specialist training around general grief awareness, supporting those bereaved by suicide and supporting grieving children and families.
www.cruse.org.uk/organisations/training-for-individuals/

It is widely recognised that there are long waiting lists for grief and loss support groups, so you may be the one who bridges the gap and brings comfort and support in someone's time of loss.

We need to acknowledge that someone living with bereavement may be more prone to mental health problems if they are unsupported in their grief, and for some this can lead to job loss, debt, addiction, relationship breakdowns and, sadly, suicide. Older people are not exempt from this. Each person, no matter their age, will deal with their grief and loss in different ways.

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Bereavement support is an outreach missional opportunity. A saying of Maya Angelou is, 'I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.' If we can outstretch our hands to the bereaved and help them 'feel' loved, cared for, and seen by another person, this may have a profound impact on them and their grief and loss journey.

Those living in grief and loss may have questions about faith, and it may be a testing time of their faith if they have one. They may ask questions such as 'Where has God gone?', 'Why didn't God heal?', 'Who goes to Heaven?', 'Can we talk to those who have died?', 'Why has this happened to me?', 'Why did my loved one have to suffer for so long?' and many more. It is at this point that the pastoral carer must be careful not to use Scripture to bypass these questions, however well meaning their intention. Accepting these questions are important to the person, and gently guiding and allowing the bereaved to ask these without the feeling of failure when we can't answer them is part of being the listening ear in pastoral care.

The pastoral carer also needs to be aware of unhelpful expectations that the wider Church may unwittingly place on a Christian who is bereaved. This can include the expectation that a bereaved person should 'cope well' with death due to the promise of eternity. This promise does not remove the sadness of the loss of a loved one, although it may ease the pain somewhat. There can be an expectation to be 'happy' that their loved one has been 'Promoted to Glory' when the bereaved person actually feels completely lost and lonely. Coming to church for a bereaved person can feel like they are living in a fishbowl, with everyone 'watching' their personal emotions. It may be for some people that they can't face their church family for

some time, whereas others find it a comfort to be back in worship during grief and loss with their brothers and sisters in Christ.

Remember that an older person's death is no less significant than that of a younger person. Yes, there would be a hope that the life has been well lived, but that person may have had a profound impact on those around them and the loss may be felt in a huge way. So paying careful attention not to dismiss a death as 'expected' or 'unsurprising' because the person was older is significantly important.



All of this is a reminder that everyone deals with grief and loss differently, and this is no different for the bereaved who do not have a faith in Christ. For someone who does not profess faith, to hear that their loved one who did believe in Christ is safe in Heaven could be quite difficult for them. Exercising caution and concern, whilst at the same time carefully using the opportunity to speak of the person's faith, needs to be done carefully and thoughtfully. Using language like 'God is in control' or 'Our lives are in God's perfect plan' may be distressing for an unbeliever to hear. In fact, even for a bereaved Christian these kinds of words may also be very distressing, so every pastoral carer needs to be aware of language and exercise gentle and sensitive comfort in a time of grief and loss.

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When someone has suffered a long, debilitating illness, the bereaved may have moments of difficult reflection. We need to remember that the hurt and sadness of watching a loved one suffer can have a profound effect on those living in grief and loss. Therefore, careful consideration of language such as 'They are now at peace' need to be used carefully. Yes, their loved one will be at peace, but the bereaved person may still struggle with the impact of that suffering and the effect this has on them. A considered and empathetic approach, and acknowledgement of this, needs to be exercised.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we have the promise of eternal life, but this does not diminish the grief and utter sadness someone may feel. It also does not take away from the fact that someone may be relieved that their loved one has died if there has been a prolonged illness or if personal circumstances have been difficult for a variety of reasons. Accepting that grief will look different for everyone, and that the process of grief again will be different for everyone, helps our pastoral care to be tailored accordingly to the person who is in need of support and care.

Be aware that the bereaved can feel very isolated and lonely even within the corps/church community. They may feel they have joined a group they never felt they would. They may feel that they are now seen differently, especially if they were part of a couple/family and now are learning to live life as a single person. If a person dies within the setting of a care home, the bereaved may have feelings of isolation if they can no longer visit the care home and are spending longer times alone and isolated. They may also grieve the interaction with staff and other residents. There are so many different scenarios, so being vigilant in looking and watching out for bereaved people and their personal circumstances may be a life-line for them.

For further information on Scriptures that link to what has been termed 'The Five Stages of Grief' please look at '*A Theological Reflection on Grief and Loss*', remembering that these stages are non-linear and a person experiencing grief may experience all of these at different times in their grieving process.

At all times, consider what is right for the person who is living in bereavement. How can the corps/church and community show care and compassion that is right for them? You may even just have to be brave enough to ask the question. Don't presume that someone wants all their meals cooked for a month, don't presume they want to talk about the person who has died – and don't presume that they don't. Don't presume that they have family and friends to talk to; instead ask gentle questions that will help the pastoral care they receive be the most helpful to them. In all things, bear with one another in love and compassion, with no judgement and no preconceived ideas of what might be best for another person.

'Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love.'
(Ephesians 4:2)

For information on death and dying please visit ['A Closer Look at Death and Dying'](#)