

How to Comfort the Grieving

A Dozen Ways to Say
“I Care”

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Liguori

Imprimi Potest:
James Shea, CSsR
Provincial, Denver Province
The Redemptorists

Imprimatur:
Monsignor Maurice F. Byrne
Vice Chancellor, Archdiocese of St. Louis

ISBN 978-0-7648-2200-1
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Excerpts from *The Amy Vanderbilt Complete Book of Etiquette: A Guide to Contemporary Living* by Letitia Baldridge, Doubleday and Company, 666 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY (a division of Bantam, Doubleday, Dell Publishing Group, Inc.), are used with permission of copyright owner.

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Cover Design: Jodi Hendrickson
Cover Image: Shutterstock

Printed in the United States of America
20 21 22 23 24 / 7 6 5 4 3

Introduction

One morning just a week before Christmas, Michael, age forty-one, left his home and drove to a nearby mall to do some final Christmas shopping for his family. Three hours later his wife, Sharon, received a phone call from a nurse at their community hospital:

Please come to the hospital immediately. There has been an accident involving your husband.

His wife made arrangements for a neighbor to look after their two young children so she could rush to the hospital. Once there, she was informed by a doctor that Michael had been involved in a traffic accident and was pronounced dead on arrival.

“I’m sorry. There was simply nothing we could do,” the doctor said sadly.

As the news of Michael’s death spread, an informal network of support began to form among family members, friends, neighbors, and work colleagues. They all wanted to provide help and hope to Sharon and her two young daughters.

When there is a death, people want to bring comfort to the grieving. Christians are moved to help the bereaved because the Scriptures make clear that the people of God are called to provide support. In the Old Testament they are invited “to comfort all who mourn” (Isaiah 61:2). And in the New Testament, St. Paul writes: “[God] encourages us in our every affliction, so that we may be able to encourage those who are in any affliction” (2 Corinthians 1:4).

While everyone wants to reach out in love, some people hesitate because they don’t know exactly what to say and do. Here are a dozen ways to say “I care” to those who mourn.

1. Be present.

It is important, when hearing about a death, to telephone the family, be present at the visitation, and attend the funeral services if possible. Whenever a death occurs, the remaining family needs to be surrounded by the extended community. Each person becomes a powerful reminder that, although the family has suffered a traumatic loss, they are not without love and support.

One man avoided attending funerals all his adult life, believing his presence would not make any difference. Later, when his wife died, he had this to say:

I realized how good it felt to see so many of our friends at the funeral home and then come to the house after the service. Now I know how important the presence of a friend is to a person who has suffered a loss.

Government officials at NASA recognized the importance of presence after the explosion of the space shuttle Challenger. Immediately after the tragedy, the families of the seven astronauts were assigned another astronaut family to provide whatever support and practical assistance was needed. Clarke Covington, manager of the Space Project of NASA's Johnson Space Center in Houston, said:

With all the vast technology of our space age, there's still nothing more powerful than one human being reaching out to another.

2. Listen with the heart.

The most common frustration of bereaved people is that their family and friends will not allow them to talk about the loss. Whenever they bring up the subject of their loved one's death, they are usually silenced by comments such as, "Oh, let's not talk about that" or "Don't you think you're being morbid?" Also, the bereaved note that other people quickly change the subject when they bring up their deceased loved one.

The bereaved need to tell and retell their story over and over and over. And with each retelling, one layer of pain is mysteriously stripped away. The greatest need the bereaved person has is to talk honestly and candidly about the loss without being silenced or judged.

Two excellent examples were George and Barbara Bush. As a family they had their share of losses, but how they managed their grief was

impressive. While living in Texas in 1949, Mrs. Bush suddenly lost her mother in an automobile accident.

Then, on a spring day in 1953, the Bushes' second child, Robin, aged three, woke up feeling too tired to play. Eventually, the doctors diagnosed leukemia and gave her only two weeks to live. The Bushes took Robin to the Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center in New York City.

Mrs. Bush remained by her daughter's bedside while Mr. Bush commuted on weekends. It was during this anguishing time of her child's illness that Mrs. Bush's hair began to gray and eventually turned white. Robin fought the cancer for eight months before she died. Friends of Barbara and George Bush observed that the couple helped each other by handing their grief back and forth, acting alternately as mourner and supporter, as speaker and listener. In fact, Mrs. Bush credited her husband with helping