



## SUPPORTING GRIEVING FAMILIES

**Acknowledge the family's grief.** Don't be afraid to name it or talk about it respectfully. Many families talk about how hard it is when people don't want to ever mention what's happened.

**Coming to terms with the loss will take time.** Recognise it might take a long time for the reality to hit home. Encourage talk about what happened. Ask questions gently: "How did you hear the news?" "How did you think the funeral went?" Don't avoid the difficult words.

**Reassure them about the normality of grief.** People can be frightened by the intensity of their grief feelings and need reassurance that they are normal, and that it won't always feel so bad.

**Take time to learn about grief yourself.** Contact skylight for helpful information on 0800 299 100.

**Let them know they have a right to have the thoughts and feelings they do.** Help them to identify and express their feelings, both positive and negative, whatever they are. Even if you are uncomfortable with their distress, don't tell them not to feel a certain way.

**Encourage family members to find healthy ways to express their feelings.** For example, angry people could find release in physical activities such as walking or running, hitting a pillow or screaming in a pillow. Others could write or draw or paint or make music as an outlet for strong feelings.

**Be there.** Just being available and staying in touch, and being available and in touch for the long haul, is a powerful support. This could mean holding a hand or giving a hug...just being present alongside someone. It could mean calling each day, or each week, or sending a card every now and then. Grieving people can feel very alone. Knowing that someone recognises the difficulty of your journey, especially in the days when everyone else's life seems to be moving on, can be very encouraging.

**Listen.** Grieving people need to share their pain with someone who will not judge them or always give them advice. Listening may mean hearing the same story, or versions of it, again and again and again. Listening well allows someone to release their thoughts and feelings and to sort and process them. This is a really important part of their grief journey.

**Be aware of your own personal issues of loss and grief.** Become aware of your own personal experiences of loss, your own beliefs about grief, your own attitudes, and your own feelings and what can trigger them. These things influence how you will respond to others. Be careful you don't impose your own style of grief on others.





## **A skylight information sheet**

**Encourage them to take all the time they need to grieve in their own way.** Remind members of grieving families that they are each unique and that grief has no timetable. Encourage them to give themselves permission to grieve, without any time restraints.

**Talk with them about grief** to help them understand and manage the grief experience.

**Encourage families to include every family member** – however young or old—in planning and in events. Have some suggestions for family participation in the aftermath of a loss or, for example in funerals or anniversary times.

**Offer practical help** – perhaps liaise with others to give the help that is most useful. Provide options and only help when people are willing to accept it. Don't push.

**Keep in touch.** Let the family members know you still care. Remember anniversaries and special days. Write, send a card, visit, email, make a phone call...give a thoughtful gift.

**Support their need to remember and to go on with life.** People heal best if they are allowed to freely remember and talk about someone or something they have lost. Questions like, 'how did you meet?' or 'what are some of your favourite memories?' can help by indicating acceptance of the memories.

**Encourage the person to get professional help if you are concerned about them.**

A talk with their GP is a good first step. Beyond that, seek a counsellor with experience in working with grieving people. Make sure they are adequately trained. If the first person isn't helpful, encourage them to try someone else. **skylight** can be contacted for some suggested counselling options.

**Every grieving person or family can teach us** about what they need from this painful time in their lives, if we take the time to be alongside them and listen. They can often also teach us about what is truly important and meaningful in our own lives.

**It's important to look after yourself too.** To support others well, we need to take the time to look after ourselves. It can be very tiring and difficult supporting people who are grieving. Take time out to relax. Make time to talk to someone you trust about your own thoughts and feelings about what's happened. Don't take on what you cannot manage. Always refer people to others if what they need is outside your knowledge or skill.

