

THE AFTER A DEATH SERIES

Friends and Family



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When the goddess emerged from the cave of her sorrow

She wept anew for there was no one there to greet her. (ancient Greek myth)

One widow said it well: "You find out who your friends are!"

Many people think that illness, death, and other tragedies bring people closer together. Actually, the opposite is more often true. Stresses build, relationships change, anger, guilt, sadness, and all the other emotions that come with grief, seem to attack everyone at different times and in different ways. Recognize that all your family and friends will be grieving differently.

1. They don't know what you need.
2. They don't know what to say.
3. They are probably afraid of their own feelings.
4. They want you to feel better so they'll feel better.
5. Most of them are uncomfortable around grief and loss.

■ There are many times when you will have to take the lead.

Audrey's eighteen-year-old son killed himself. Three weeks after his death, she took her seven-year-old daughter to church to get ready for the Christmas program. As she walked in the door, thirty women working on costumes became suddenly silent. Audrey sighed. She turned to the friend who had carpooled with her and said, "Our pastor said we would have the burden of making people comfortable. I guess I start now," and she walked to the nearest table and simply opened up her arms for hugs. Voices rang out and she was immediately surrounded by loving arms and heart-felt tears. Take the lead! If no one calls you to meet for lunch – call somebody new. Want to see a movie? It may take six or seven calls, but find someone or go alone and have your own popcorn. Even

though it's hard, make a list of what you want to do and go after it.

■ You will hear a lot of stupid things.

People worry and worry about what to say to you. They're afraid of saying the wrong thing, reminding you of bad memories and hurting you; so they try to make it better and often fail miserably. As one bereaved mother said, "At least they gave me lip service and didn't ignore me." Another had words of real wisdom: "When people say how I'll feel better soon, or that at least I have other children or good memories, or it could have been worse, or when they say he's in a better place – I'm not ready to hear it. In a few years I'll look back and think how most of those sayings were true – but not yet. When people give you clichés and obviously don't understand, it may be helpful just to say, "Thank you – I'm just not there yet."

■ Prepare to be surprised.

You are likely to be surprised at who among your friends and family steps up to the plate and who disappears into the shadows. People you hardly know will contact you and tell you their stories and know how you feel. Others will not invite you to their parties and ignore you completely. People are afraid of grief. And you may be surprised at your own reactions to friends and family. Aunt Doe (no cousin ever called her "Aunt Doris") was gentle and as my mother said, "Never said a bad word about anybody." But after Aunt Doe's husband died, mother said something and Aunt Doe let her have it with both barrels. Mother was astounded. "That just wasn't Doris," she said over and over again. "That just wasn't Doris." She didn't understand about grief.

■ Some families have seagull grieverers.

"They fly in, usually from out of town. They make a lot of noise. They bother everybody. They make a crappy mess, then leave and make somebody else clean it up." This is your grief and your life that is important here. Find the

help you need, whether it's legal, spiritual, emotional, or medical, and take care of yourself. It's not your job right now to take of everyone else. It's your job to make sure you grieve in healthy ways without interference from family and friends. That's why it's important to:

■ Find a support group or a good listener.

In the beautiful book, *Tear Soup*, an old and somewhat wise woman named Grandy suffers a great loss and has to make tear soup. She hears of some other people who are also making tear soup, calls them together for a BYOS – bring your own soup – dinner and they all share their tear soup. The last sentence on that page is vital. It says, "And they became Grandy's new best friends." Your funeral director, pastor, local hospice or hospital social work department should have a list of local support groups. You don't have to say anything when you go. You can share at your own comfort level, and you will learn a lot from people who have walked the walk. Louise said, "I walked in and they were gathered around having coffee and laughing. I thought, 'How can they laugh when I'm in such pain?' But way back in my head, a little voice said, 'Lou, someday you'll laugh again, too.' That group saved my life." And if the first group isn't a fit for you, try another. If there is no group in your area, find a friend, family member – someone – who will listen to you without criticizing or telling you what to do.

You will hear, "Call me if you need anything," or "Let me know what I can do." Those are caring statements. The problem is, it puts the burden of contact on you, the griever. Never be afraid to ask for what you need. Never be afraid to find new friends and every night before you go to sleep, say a quiet "thank you" to those friends and family members who are there for you. Some nights it will be short, but gradually it will expand into an impressive collection of love and support.

A Caring Gift to you from: _____