THE NEEDS OF THE BEREAVED AT THE TIME OF THE FUNERAL

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When considering bereaved people's needs at the time of the funeral, it is a help to recall some of the things that affect our response to the death of someone close in the early days of the bereavement.

If we have some warning of the death and are able to prepare for it emotionally if not practically, this will help in accepting that it has happened. We will not be caught completely unawares. We are likely to be able to function a little better when it comes to decisions and carrying out the necessary actions than if the death had come without warning. If the death was sudden, the shock and disbelief may persist longer and we may share in decisions without feeling part of what is happening. It may seem like the enactment of some distant scene without relevance to us. It will help considerably if those involved with the bereaved at this stage know how the death happened and whether it was expected or not.

It helps also to know where it happened. Over 60% of deaths take place away from home, many in hospital, others in homes for the elderly or whilst travelling on business or holiday or in other circumstances. Often those bereaved are not present at the time of death and this can make acceptance difficult and slower, particularly if the body is not seen and there is no emotionally satisfying confirmation of the death. Not surprisingly, we will cling to the hope that some mistake has been made until we are forced to let that hope go. Going through the motion of arranging *a* funeral is one thing but feeling it is *the* funeral of someone we love is another. Whether or not the body is seen depends on individual choice and circumstance but it usually helps with acceptance and with the saying of the progressive 'goodbyes' that are expressed, before and when the death occurs, when we see the body before or at the funeral. It is important that time and opportunity is made for these farewells in appropriate settings and with familiar company if possible.

If we were not present at the death, how the news of it is broken to us is important. Breaking bad news can be very difficult. Often not enough attention is paid to how it affects the bearer of the news, which in turn can influence how well or badly it is conveyed. Hearing such bad news can be devastating and often the way it was conveyed is remembered clearly for years afterwards. Handled badly it can remain an unresolved part of grief.

Although a unique experience for those most bereft by the death, their previous familiarity with funerals can help. Many have not attended a funeral until they have to go to the one for the person who meant most to them. This is likely to be true for many young adults and children. It will help those looking after the funeral arrangements if they can discover if the mourners have been to funerals before, rather than assume it is known territory. An explanation of what will happen may give reassurance as well as information. This is particularly valuable for children and adolescents who may be attending. A simple step-by-step explanation of the day will make it less bewildering.



"The various rites of burial give us the inestimable comfort of feeling that we can still do something for them, of having at our disposal ways of approaching their being". **Paul-Louis Landsberg,** *The Experience of Death.*

The amount of support available from others will clearly influence how the bereaved cope. There are immediate and later tasks to perform after a death and whilst there are some useful publications available outlining these, relatively few of us read them before we have to. Thus many people come to this situation knowing only a little of what has to be done. Guidance and practical help from someone they trust can be invaluable.

The demands made on the bereaved are also a factor in this early period, as they are later. Young children or elderly relatives may need looking after; the death may bring many callers; there may be financial worries; relationships with others, now also bereaved, may be strained.

The more we can understand about these and other reactions to bereavement in the period up to the funeral, the more personally suited our care and arrangements will be.

A funeral is a very important event. We are laying to rest the body of someone we love and we will not see or touch it again. Physically there is finality about it. It marks the closing of one chapter and the opening of another. It is a moment of farewell, of leaving behind, of going on. It is an occasion for others to express sadness over the death and concern for those closely bereaved; for collective and open grieving when all who have been bereaved can mourn what each has lost with the death of this one person. It is a moment when we appreciate the value of the life that has been lived and the depths of loss. We grapple with the meaning at the heart of things. Those with faith in life beyond death will find it a time when this faith is affirmed. It is an experience needing rituals with words and actions that aid the expression of feelings. All those involved with the funeral have important roles to play and the way the arrangements are handled can make a difference to grieving and recovery.

Recognising cultural variations and the individual nature of responses to grief, the following are some of the needs bereaved people have at the time of the funeral:—

They need time. Time to absorb information, ask questions, review a decision before it is finalised,

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consult others if necessary. It may not be easy to reconcile this need for time with the pressures of the necessary timetable, but it is important that the bereaved do not feel rushed or pressurised.

They need sensitivity to changes of mood. At times they will want to talk, at others they will wish to be quiet. They will need others around them but they will also want to be alone. Some of the time they will want to be active doing practical things, but they will also want to simply sit and do nothing. They may do something and later forget what they did, or set about a contrasting task.

They need to feel supported by those close to them, by those carrying out arrangements and by the wider community. They are unlikely to be able to cope with many people at this stage, but they appreciate the expressions of sympathy, the letters that arrive and the attendance at the funeral.

Help with the essential decisions is important, with the gathering of information, the notification of relatives and others, the visits to registrar, bank and church, the discussions with the Funeral Director and person conducting the funeral. It will be a great help if someone is present at all discussions to take notes ask questions, and hear the details which those most upset may not take in. A prepared list of the areas to be covered in a meeting with the Funeral Director etc., will help. Part of this helping is to enable the bereaved to feel that they too have shared in any of the decision-making.

Clear and sufficient information is required. Those responsible for imparting it should be aware that what appears straightforward to them may be far less so for the bereaved person. It will help if the essential details are written down and left as a reminder. If the question of how much the funeral will cost is not raised by the bereaved, it is important that details are given before the arrangements are handed on to the Funeral Director. If there is to be a cremation, information about the disposal of ashes is important and in particular details of how long after the funeral this will need to be decided. It is usually now possible to make a decision about whether or not the coffin is conveyed out of sight at the moment of committal at a crematorium or left in position until after the mourners have left and it would help if this could be discussed before the funeral takes place. It was suggested earlier that an explanation of the day helps. This can be reinforced here when discussing the procedures to be followed at a funeral.

A personalised funeral is important. Those conducting it should find out as much as they can about the deceased and the bereaved and ensure appropriate personal reference and the use of the name of the deceased. It is encouraging to hear of the more common discussions now being held about the practice of a rota Church Minister for a crematorium and the time limit set on funerals held there. It would be very useful if all those involved in arranging funerals at both cemetary and crematorium, clergy, funeral directors, cemetary and crematorium staff, could meet regularly.

A focus for grief and memory are important for many. It takes time to disengage from a meaningful relationship, the bond only slowly loosening. Remembering is important for those grieving now and for coming generations. Those now dead have lived a significant life, and they have made a difference to our lives. We need to find ways of remembering with appropriate memorials. For some it will be a marked grave, for others a name in a Book of Remembrance. Others might prefer a plaque or a rose-bush, a gift of a seat or some other tangible sign. Yet we need to be aware of grief, of memory getting stuck, fastened to one place. Memorials are steps along the way, not places where the living have to stay perpetually.

Cremation is much more common now than burial and there does not appear to have yet been any research into the difference on grief, if any, between the two methods. It is a question of individual choice, but it is appropriate to express concern over whether we have accepted cremation as the norm without very much thought being given to how it might affect mourning and what subtle changes might be brought about by it in our understanding of death and our need to remember. In Indian culture, for instance, cremation has a spiritual and philosophical base. In Britain it would seem to be more a question of custom and land space. **We have not yet thought through the implications of cremation.**

A major factor in the changing, improving attitude towards the care of the bereaved has been the greater knowledge we now have about grief. One element in this is the awareness we have of our need to take care of and be responsible for the last resting place of a loved person. Grieving is helped if we can have a sense of acceptance and peace over this. Circumstances sometimes make this impossible and in our caring for the bereaved faced with this, we may find an area of grief requiring more attention than usual.

This increased knowledge also emphasizes the importance of all those who care for the bereaved having good contact with each other. This is particularly true, around the time of the funeral.

"Rituals express the collective unconscious of the culture, for which they perform a religious, social, or therapeutic function". **Lily Pincus,** *Death & the Family.*

don't drink don't drive
don't take your boat out on the seas
take care beware unwind
watch light relief and comedies
exercise and you will find
death is an avoidable disease
grow old and old and old
along with me
keep death to the clinics
keep it in the wards
and cardboard posters tell us
to beware take care
don't drink don't drive
survive survive
Is it surprising we're surprised
when someone we love dies?

Susan Wallbank

The British Organ Donor Society

The address of BODY, the new British Organ Donor Society, is Balsham, Cambridge CB1 6DL. Tel: 0223 893636.

BODY has three main aims: (1) to act as a self-help/support group for donor/recipient families; (2) to promote the carrying of multi-organ donor cards; (3) to act as a voice on behalf of donor, recipient and card-carrying families. Membership is free or by voluntary donation. BODY will not be bringing recipients and donors together on a one-to-one basis, but plans a pilot discussion group including both donors and recipients. The organisation in Cambridge is involved with the local Compassionate Friends group.

The Chairman of BODY is Mr. John Evans, Ph.D., B.Sc.