

## Etiquette of Death

By Stephen Gauer

A few Sundays ago, the day after my grand-daughter died, I went to visit my mother. My mother is 88; she knew I'd donated a kidney to Amelia last June. I said, "Mom, I have very sad news. Amelia died yesterday."

She cried for a few seconds and then dried her eyes and said, "Is there any chance you can get the kidney back?"

My mother likes to provoke, but this rhetorical pistol shot was appalling. I offer it as the ultimate example of what not to say to someone trying to cope with the horrible, wrenching experience of death. Other people in my life – co-workers, friends – said nothing at all, which registered as a milder, but still baffling, level of insensitivity.

On the other hand, many people were utterly kind and generous to Alison, Amelia's mother, when they heard the sad news. An old friend flew in from Africa to be with her for the terrible week following Amelia's death. Other friends called every day, helping her through a very hard time. Her family – of which I'm proud to be part – did their best to keep her afloat.

There is a modern etiquette around death, and its delineation is mostly common sense. When someone you know is grieving, reach out to them. Say something simple, like "I'm sorry for your loss." No one expects words of wisdom or an eloquent speech; just speak from the heart. You're affirming the human condition, not offering therapy.

If you can, write a short note or card expressing sympathy. If you have an anecdote or memory to share, that's even better. When my dad died, the best note came from a friend of mine who accompanied us downtown to school back in the late sixties. Dad drove while Kim and I

dissected the news of the day. “Your dad always treated me like an adult,” he wrote. “He listened to what I had to say, even when I didn’t know what I was talking about.”

Grieving people need help. Instead of saying, “Call me if you need help ...”, offer to do something specific – buy food, iron clothes, mop the kitchen floor, clean out the dead person’s effects. “Bereaved people exist in a bubble of sorrow,” says Alison. “They can’t even figure out how to put one foot in front of another, never mind coming up with lists and assignments.”

It’s important to come to the funeral or memorial service. Your presence is a comfort for the grieving family, whether you knew the deceased or not. If the obituary suggests a donation to a charity or medical cause, get out your cheque book and give. Two co-workers of mine donated to the Transplant Unit at Toronto General Hospital, a lovely gesture which triggered a card from the hospital notifying us of their gift.

People who suffer a terrible loss as Alison has will want to talk obsessively about the person who died and the circumstances of their death. Part of grieving is talking about grief, how it feels and how it redefines your life, over and over again, to try and make sense of it. You don’t need to offer solutions, just listen.

There are a few “don’ts” to keep in mind.

Don’t tell the grieving person that the deceased is “in a better place”, “reunited with God” or “up in heaven where things are great” unless you’re sure you’re on the same religious wavelength.

Don’t send flowers. Most people under the age of 80 think they’re a waste of money.

Don't expect immediate return calls when you phone, or acknowledgements if you write; the grieving person is probably hearing from a lot of people and the usual rules of etiquette don't apply.

At work, don't pretend nothing happened. Don't avoid a grieving co-worker because you don't know them well. Offer a few words of sympathy. At work, after Amelia's death, I was deeply touched when someone I barely knew came up to me and said he was sorry.

Don't expect a grieving friend to want to be part of large groups of people. When they're ready to socialize, they'll let you know.

And don't expect your friend, family member or co-worker to snap out it in a few weeks. People who lose a loved one face a long and difficult grieving period. If you knew the deceased, you may be sad for a few weeks, but soon enough your life will continue. Someone who suffers a devastating loss has to reconstruct their life, and that takes a long time.

"And don't forget about us down the road," says Alison. "The first weeks after a death are a whirlwind. Everyone comes out of the woodwork. In the months and years that follow, the bereaved will still need your support – someone to listen to them or invite them places."

Death, of course, visits everyone eventually, so when in doubt, treat a person who's grieving the way you would want to be treated when your turn comes – with sympathy, concern, generosity and kindness. By reaching out you will do good things, and help people who need you.