



# Haven Herald

## How to Help Someone in Grief

by Joyce Hanson

As humans we want to help when others are in distress and suffering especially those to whom we are close. Grief at the death of a loved one is a time of sadness and suffering that cries out for love, understanding and help but also a time when many feel intimidated by the strong emotions evoked by death. Despite the fact that death is inevitable, we commonly see it as a failure which we do not want to acknowledge and so we do not know how to do so. A grieving person is not easy to love. We may be uncomfortable with the way a person acts in grief.

In thinking about how to help one grieving a death, it is useful to have some understanding of what grief is like. It is essential to know that grief is unique for each person and should not be compared to the grief of others. Furthermore there is no timetable for how long the grieving process should take because that too is different for each individual.

Initially there may be shock, numbness and disbelief. There may be irrational anger at the deceased or others who were present or involved. Guilt may appear in regard to things one might or could have done. These feelings may be expressed in many different ways. Some people may appear to be strong and seemingly in control while others may be unable to think clearly or function rationally. These expressions may not be characteristic of the person you know. There are alternating swings in emotion within the same day, over several days or weeks. Also grief is expressed physically as well as emotionally which means that there may be increased susceptibility to illness or accident, decreases or increases in eating and sleeping and other kinds of debilitating physical pain.

Accepting the bereaved where they are is important. Knowing what to expect will help us to acknowledge the death in an appropriate way which is the basis of helping. What this means will depend on the situation including the nature of your relationship with the deceased and the bereaved. Maybe being with the person is desirable, maybe writing a note, maybe offering direct help in practical ways is appreciated. We need to be present for the bereaved in whatever way works. It is important to convey that you care. People grieving may not always be clear in their expression of what they need, but they will recognize what feels right to them. It is best not to simply tell the person to call if they need anything. They are often unable to respond to such a vague suggestion, so suggest some specific offers and ask if any of those will be good for them. If an offer is accepted be sure to follow through with what you promised. We may make suggestions but avoid advice about what to do or not do. We cannot fix the situation but we can listen and validate their feelings without being judgmental. The desires of the bereaved and their family must always be the first consideration.

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## Letter from the Executive Director

Haven is a busy place this time of year as we welcome new volunteers to our training class and plan for our spring support groups. Spring is a season of great beauty and warmer days, but it also brings us to a time of year that can be difficult for those in grief. The sadness of loss does not line up with the joy of spring weather and blooming flowers. Things are not always as they seem.

In this edition of the newsletter we will look at caring ways to help someone in grief. Intentions are good but can sometimes be misguided and add more stress to an already difficult situation. It is so important to offer support in a way that considers what the bereaved individual is comfortable with. Is that offer truly helpful or just a way to make us feel better? What we say and what we do need to be part of a thoughtful process, not an overwhelming production.

A loss can be a time of great emotional challenges but the wishes of the person in grief should always take precedent.

Jill Bellacicco



**Haven is committed to the emotional support of the bereaved, and to the seriously ill, the dying, and their families and friends.**



## What Worked For Me

by Mary Smith



Our fathers were in medical school together, so our parents knew each other for many years. Susan and I ended up as freshmen in the same college. We became friends. After college, we were young single women living and working in Washington, DC.

Susan liked to play matchmaker and set me up on a blind date. Before my date, she said to me, "I think you're going to marry him." She never knew that I did marry him because she died in a car accident six months after I met him.

Susan was close to her mother. They looked alike, almost like sisters. They shared parallel businesses. Susan was a successful interior designer. Her mother had a successful antique business.

About ten years after Susan's death, I went with a friend to the Washington Antiques Show and there stumbled upon Susan's mother's antique booth. I hadn't seen her since Susan's funeral.

Susan's mother greeted me warmly. I was happy to see her, but immediately felt the loss of Susan. I wasn't sure what I should say about Susan, if anything, but I ended up saying, "I think of Susan often." It was true, I did. Her mother started crying and said, "No one ever mentions Susan to me. Thank you for mentioning her."

I think of that moment often. Her mother taught me a great lesson. We want people to remember our loved ones. We want to know that they are remembered. We want to hear people say their names. It's a kindness to let people know we remember.

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In the immediate aftermath and considering your knowledge, expertise and relationship with the bereaved, you might offer to research possibilities for a funeral, memorial service or reception. You might help in writing an obituary or designing a program for the service and arrange publishing or printing. You might volunteer to notify various people and organizations about the death and arrangements. Keeping a record of notifications made, donations and other gifts of goods and services might be appreciated.

Other possibilities could include offering to run errands or do chores such as walking the dog, cleaning the house, picking up children, providing transportation for out of town visitors. Given the number of things needed and the many offers of help, you might offer to coordinate these activities so that things are handled with maximum efficiency and duplication of effort and chaos are avoided.

There may be a concern on the part of the bereaved about managing to function during the services and reception. Depending on the circumstances it might be helpful to have a receiving line so that the bereaved can greet the guests in a more orderly fashion. It is considerate to have someone monitoring the process who can suggest a respite at times for the bereaved to rest and regroup as needed.

All of these are practical considerations and logistics of dealing with arranging and carrying out the immediate actions needed to complete the ceremonial activities normally occurring after a death.

Many people, whether they attend the services or not wish to offer written condolences. Death seems to encourage people to make an effort to communicate perhaps because death touches a person in the deepest and most intimate way and brings out feelings about the value of life for ourselves and our loved ones.

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A note may include the following: acknowledgement of the loss, an expression of sympathy, special qualities of the deceased, stories recounting special occasions or other shared experiences with the person, what the person meant to you and others, help they had provided and other treasured memories. One hopes that these things will be comforting to the bereaved which they usually are and which they may continue to be as they may be kept and read again and again.

Such cards and notes are often sent from people with whom there may have been no recent contact with the deceased or the bereaved. I received a note from a former co-worker from such a long time ago that the person identified her association with me in case I had forgotten who she was. Although such notes are usually sent soon after the death, I received one three years later because the person had only just found out, and I appreciated that she remembered me and the loss even so long after the fact.

After all the flurry of activity and concern, it is often the case that sometime later, weeks or months, the bereaved is feeling the loss of the connections and support that were evident earlier. If the relationship was close, this is a good time to keep in touch and arrange to spend time with the bereaved. Talking and listening with them can be very beneficial.

Usually the bereaved will do much of the talking as you listen. The person often will repeat the story over and over not to inform you of the facts but to help them believe and accept what happened. Recognize the need for silence at times. Speak of the deceased by name. Do not tell the person how well they are doing as you really do not know what is inside, and this could create expectations that the bereaved may not want to feel they must live up to. Do not be unrealistically cheerful and soothing thereby minimizing their fears or worries. Do not change the subject because you are uncomfortable or talk about your own problems. Do not tell the person what they should or should not do or how far they should have moved on by this time. A person who is listened to respectfully and with genuine interest and concern may come up with insights or solutions on their own to their problems and questions.

It is also important to suggest things to do with the person as simple as taking a walk or perhaps something involving more energy such as attending an event or getting together with other people. However, do not be surprised or discouraged if the person does not accept or accepts but cancels at the last minute. This may be due to fear of rejection or losing control, but continue to ask in the future because as the healing progresses they will likely be more receptive at a later time. You may also find that the person, at least initially, is reluctant to be with their closest friends because they had shared so many good times together in the past and are not yet ready to enjoy these friends without the missing person.

As time goes on, the pain may become more acute again as the reality sinks in that this is the way it will always be since the deceased is forever gone. Also as the anniversaries of the birth or death or other significant occasions arrive they will be once more aware of what has been lost. You might make a note of these dates and contact the person on that date by calling or sending a note, flowers or other small token to let them know that you remember and are thinking of them. They will be gratified to find that they and the deceased are not forgotten and so have a continuing presence in the world.

When you have been a caring and faithful presence, it is a thoughtful gesture to consider affording the bereaved an opportunity to reciprocate in some way. This can help the person feel not a needy mourner but one who is healing, learning, and growing, a worthy person who has a contribution to make to society.

As a final thought, consider that you have shared a deep connection with another person and this has forged a kinship with humanity which reminds us of the value of life and the importance of relationships and that in giving you have also been enriched.



#### HOW HAVEN IS FUNDED

Haven is classified by the Internal Revenue Service as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. It is funded mainly by donations from individuals in the community who wish to support our work and by those who donate in memory of a loved one. Donations are tax deductible. If you are interested in making a donation, please contact Haven at (703) 941-7000 or at [havenofnova@verizon.net](mailto:havenofnova@verizon.net)

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Haven of Northern Virginia, Inc.

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Annandale, Virginia 22003

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## **Spring Schedule**

Six-week General Bereavement Support Group  
7:30 – 9:00 p.m.

Six-week Widow/Widower/Partner Support Group  
Time(s) to be determined

Spring groups are full, dates of future groups to be determined.  
Call Haven soon.

Drop-in Suicide Loss Support Group  
1st and 3rd Saturdays of each month  
11:00 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.

*Haven also offers individual support in person; please call to schedule an appointment. For immediate support without an appointment, a volunteer is available on a walk-in basis Monday through Friday between 10:30 a.m. and 1:00 p.m.*

### **Contact Information**

Haven of Northern Virginia  
4606 Ravensworth Road  
Annandale, Virginia 22003  
Phone: (703) 941-7000  
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E-mail: [havenofnova@verizon.net](mailto:havenofnova@verizon.net)

### **Hours of Operation**

Monday through Friday  
9:30 a.m. – 2:30 p.m.  
[www.havenofnova.org](http://www.havenofnova.org)

Messages may be left on our  
voicemail after hours