TIPS ON DEALING WITH GRIEVING INDIVIDUALS

In a trauma situation, it is important to validate and acknowledge individuals’ feelings, build individuals’ resilience and coping skills, and provide a supportive, safe environment. Here are tips on ways to work with those who are grieving:

Do’s
★ Acknowledge the loss with a call, card or letter.

★ Express your sorrow for the deceased and the family. Say you are sorry about the griever’s pain and the situation. Simply say, “I’m sorry” or, “Words fail me.”

★ Remember to extend condolences to forgotten mourners: grandparents, siblings, stepchildren, aunts and uncles, and cousins. Be observant of the children. Children mourn too.

★ Be patient. Give the individual time to grieve and recover. Avoid judgments about the bereaved family and the tragic situation.

★ Listen quietly and nonjudgmentally. Allow the griever to talk and in the early stages of grieving, to take the lead in conversation. Allow the griever to express as much grief as they are feeling at any given moment and are willing to share. The griever needs “permission to grieve.” Allow the grieving person to talk about the endearing qualities of the person that has died.

★ It is alright to mention the deceased by name.

★ Let individuals know that their reactions are normal.

★ Arrange or provide practical assistance and support as appropriate. Also encourage individual to ask for help. Be aware that it is often difficult for grieving people to reach out for help.

★ Let your genuine concern and caring be visible. Accept that it is not possible for you to make the grieving person feel better. Be accessible, but not pushy.

★ Encourage family to take care of themselves (i.e., eat properly and get rest).

★ Ensure family does not become isolated and has some type of support network.

★ Keep in mind that you may become emotional as well; be aware of your own feelings and how the loss affects you.

★ Respect family’s privacy.

★ Be aware that a lot of attention is focused on the family during the first two weeks after notification, so consider periodically contacting and checking on the family after this initial time period to let the family know that people care and are thinking of them.
Remember holidays and special family dates can be difficult times, especially during the first year. Do not allow the family to be isolated and provide comfort at these times when possible.

Understand the grieving process. Be aware of warning signs when professional help needs to be sought. Encourage family to seek professional help if unable to cope or struggling with emotional response for months.

**Don’ts**

- Don't be afraid of silence. Don't be afraid of tears.
- Don't inhibit open communication. For example, don’t change the subject when the griever mentions the deceased.
- Don’t let your own sense of helplessness or discomfort, keep you from reaching out to the bereaved.
- Don’t impose your explanation on why this has happened. Don’t try to answer the question, “why?”
- Don’t say “I know how you feel” or “Everything will be all right”
- Don’t say anything that implies a judgment about their feelings: “You ought to be feeling better now.” or, “You’ll be feeling better in a month or so.” or, “I know how you feel.” Don’t encourage the grieving person to “get over it” for any reason.
- Don’t make statements or ask questions that induce guilt or affix blame.
- Don’t be too direct or give advice. (For example, don’t make suggestions regarding packing up clothes, photos, etc.)
- Don’t try to find something positive in the death. Don’t make statements, such as: “God knows best” or “It’s God’s will”.
- Don’t impose your own religious beliefs or discount those of the bereaved family.

**Source:** This is a compilation and adaptation of information provided in Army War College’s A Leader’s Guide to Trauma in the Unit, Fort Sill’s Care Team training and Phantom Thunder Care Team Guide, Fort Riley’s CDR/1SGT Course, Deployment Health Clinical Center’s fact sheet entitled A Normal Reaction to an Abnormal Situation, and Operation READY Rear Detachment Commander’s training.