

How To Response To A Notice Of Condolence

If you want to clear out a room quickly, bring up the subject of death and you are well on your way. Been there, done that! As a rabbi, I often gather with my clergy colleagues, both Jewish and non-Jewish. When we talk about interesting or amusing experiences, the subject of death often arises, which we all accept as part of our job. When an outsider comes by and wants to part take of the conversation, when they hear what the subject matter is, they quickly depart.

I have had the experience of officiating and counseling thousands of individuals going through the trials of bereavement. Since most of us are not familiar and uncomfortable with this delicate subject, which unfortunately affects us all at one time or the other, how do we respond?

A scholarly sage of some two thousand plus years ago stated, “Do not attempt to comfort an individual at the first shock of their bereavement”. Very wise advice! When we hear that someone’s loved one is dying or has just died, we rush to their side and offer help. Most of the time we don’t know what we are offering or what help they might need, if any.

Tips

1. Don’t rush to someone’s side at the first hours of one’s passing. The individual needs to be able to sort things out in their own mind without having to deal with others who are offering to make calls, bring food or just cry. Leave the person alone. Hopefully they are with their family, if not the people at the hospital or care center, who are training professionals can give them the first steps of guidance that is needed. The person will call you if they need help at the start.
2. Find out from Eileen what the circumstances are. Was it an expected passing; was it in town or out of town; was the relationship of the individual and the deceased close or not, have they ever experienced this before; do they need help or would they prefer some time alone with family or just by themselves.
3. Once you find out the particulars, a text, e-mail or phone call will suffice. Send these only if you are offering some help. Notices of condolence are better sent several days later. The immediate needs need to be taken care of.
4. What do people need:
 - a. a shoulder to cry on or an embrace, if you are real close
 - b. food for people returning to the house from the cemetery
 - c. phone calls to notify people (e-mails and text to announce someone’s passing are a social faux pas)
 - d. transportation to and from the cemetery or funeral home
 - e. child care or animal care for pets
 - f. someone to prepare food in the house and not attend the funeral so that people can come back and have food prepared
 - g. sometimes there is nothing, but you offered. That means a lot.

5. Explain to them the process of what is happening. Dealing with death is a process. You first deal with the immediate
 - a. There has been a death
 - b. Funeral arrangements have to be made. Are there any instructions that the deceased has left behind?
 - c. What sort of service would you like to have? Try to make it a celebration of their life. It does not have to be a party, but it should be uplifting and comforting, hitting the high points of one's life.
 - d. Visitation at the home after the service is important. It gives you a chance to visit with people and for you and them to express your feelings. This will also help you know which direction you should go in the way of helping.
 - e. Don't expect to feel great immediately. This process takes time. A person who was part of your life is not erased in a few days. You'll have good and bad days. The good will always overtake the bad. Finally, the hole in your heart scabs over and you are able to deal with the person's passing intellectually and not emotionally. The one thing that you can guarantee them is that they will not feel this way forever. Our bodies don't allow this. If so, we would never be able to sustain the loss of a loved one.
 - f. Encourage some sort of memorial tribute such as donations to a fund or charity which the individual held close to their hearts.
 - g. Be there for the person after the crowds subside. Many people going through bereavement are forgotten the next week. A call, visit, text or email in the next few weeks and months help in the healing.

Being a good friend and knowing what to offer and when is very crucial. If you do this correctly, you will find it uplifting and fulfilling, rather than depressing. We can provide a vital service to people, if we know how to do it right. To put it in CISM terms, just like the pager, experience makes the process easy.