

Follow Up With Survivors

I. Introduction

Depending on the helper's relationship with the survivor (friend/ family/ neighbor/ stranger), a follow up call or visit is an important part of emotional first aid. Many survivors report that immediately following the initial tragedy they received care and attention. However, in the days and weeks following the initial impact survivors noticed that family members, neighbors and coworkers seem to "disappear". The reasons for this lack of follow up by helpers are numerous, but the most common reason is "helplessness". Helpers don't follow up with survivors because they don't know what to say or do.

II. How to Follow Up with a Survivor

- A. **Get beyond Helplessness:** The fact that you feel helpless (*"I don't know what I will say or do."*) is NO reason not to follow up with a survivor. Recognize that you feel helpless (it's normal), and follow up with the survivor anyway.
- B. **Take the Initiative:** Be specific about how you would like to meet with the survivor i.e. *"How about we meet for a cup of coffee next Monday?"* or *"How about I come over tomorrow around 9:00am with your favorite coffee from Starbucks."*
- C. **Practice Emotional First Aid During the Follow Up Meeting(s) . . .**
 - **Ask** the survivor about *"How are you doing now? It's been two weeks since John died."*
 - **Listen** quietly
 - **Validate** what the survivor is saying . . .
 - ... *"It sounds like you still can't quite believe it."*
 - ... *"It sounds like you are pleased with how you were treated at the hospital."*
 - ... *"It seems like your family is very supportive."*
 - **Ask Gentle Questions.** For example . . .
 - ... *"When I left yesterday you were waiting for your son to arrive. When did he get here?"*
 - ... *"How did your children react when you told them?"*
 - Invite the survivor to **Reminisce** . . .
 - ... *"I know you and Bob went to Europe last month. Do you have pictures we can look at?"*
 - ... *"How long were you and Bob married?"*

- **Normalize . . .**
. . . "It's very normal to still feel numb."
. . . "Everyone grieves differently. You and your husband will not grieve in the same way."
- **Empathize . . .**
. . . "I'm very sorry for your loss of Bob."

D. **Provide Practical Support During Your Follow Up Meeting(s)**

There are many practical ways of helping a survivor in the aftermath of a tragedy. These practical ways of helping may include providing a ride; helping to arrange a garage sale; providing meals; and helping the survivor attend to all of the details that usually arise after a death has occurred.

III. **Helping the Survivor Identify Follow Up Assistance**

There are many follow up services for survivors of tragedy including professional counselors, support groups and helpful literature. Many survivors express a desire for these resources in the aftermath of a tragedy. However, they are not familiar with the "helping system", and they do not have the energy to try to figure out how to obtain the resources they need. You can help the survivor identify these resources in his community. Following are suggestions you can make to the survivor about how to locate a counselor, support group or helpful reading material.

- **Family doctor:** The family physician may be a valuable referral source.
- **Previous Counselor:** If the survivor was in counseling in the past and had a positive experience, that could be a good place to start.
- **Family and Friends** can be valuable resources in locating a counselor or support group.
- **Hospital Social Workers/Chaplains** can often provide helpful written materials as well as referrals to counseling and support groups.
- **Victim-Witness programs** are located in most police departments across the country. They can be valuable resources for information and referrals.
- Local **hospices** can be very helpful in providing grief materials and referrals
- **National Organizations** like AARP, Survivors of Suicide and Compassionate Friends can help depending on the nature of the tragedy. A Google search can quickly help locate these national organizations.
- **United Ways and Volunteer Centers** are valuable sources of "who does what" in the community.
- **The Red Cross** can be a valuable source of information and referrals.

Form a Helping Partnership with the survivor. You don't want to "take over" the search for follow up assistance, nor do you want to let the survivor fend for himself. The best approach, if the survivor agrees, is for you to assist in the "researching" sources of assistance (phone #s, cost, type of help . . .), and then encourage the survivor to make the actual phone calls.

III. Summary

- A. Remember that healing from a tragic event **takes time** . . . maybe a lifetime. Don't expect the survivor to *"get over it"* quickly.
- B. In providing follow up care, **don't take over**. Ensure that the survivor stays in control of the type of assistance he wants and gets.
- C. **Don't expect the survivor to contact you for follow up assistance.** Don't say *"call me if you need me"*. The survivor may be too tired or distraught to reach out to you.
- D. Just because you suspect you can't "do anything" for the survivor, **reach out** and demonstrate that you care.
- E. Remember that survivors **want to talk about their deceased loved one**. Don't avoid listening to the survivor about his loved one. By encouraging the survivor to talk about the deceased you won't cause more pain. By listening to the survivor reminisce you will help him feel less alone.