



The Grief-Informed Funeral Director

If you work in this profession, ongoing grief education should never be an afterthought.

BY ALAN D. WOLFELT, PH.D.

I often say that funeral home staffs have one of the most important jobs in the world. After all, what could be more essential than helping families through the most difficult experiences of their lives? I marvel at – and am so grateful for – the work you do.

But we all know a funeral director who doesn't seem to have their heart and mind fully in the right place. Perhaps due to lack of ongoing training and/or a funeral home culture that places the emphasis on efficiency over effectiveness, these funeral directors can sometimes come across to grieving families as distracted, self-focused, unhelpful or insensitive. In addition to helping some staff members who are not well-matched to funeral service find a different role or career, I believe additional grief education is foundational to anyone working in this profession.

I recently learned about a couple whose two children were killed in a car crash. Less than 48 hours later, the funeral director mentioned to the grieving parents that he might be able to “give them a deal” for two caskets. He pushed them to hold the service in a small venue, even though the parents knew that likely hundreds of community members would want to attend the funeral and support the family. And he suggested that while he was completing paperwork, they should “go out for lunch and enjoy themselves.”

I realize this is an extreme example. But I have seen many more subtle instances in which a lack of grief-informed education and poor interpersonal skills have created missed opportunities at best and unsupportive (if not cruel) interactions at worst.

If I had the opportunity to create a basic grief education curriculum for funeral home staff, following are some of the fundamentals I'd include.

Necessity of Mourning

The capacity to love creates the necessity to mourn. Grief (the internal response to loss) and mourning (the shared social response to loss) represent the process of the griever's head and heart coming to terms with the painful new reality of the death. They are also on the way to finding meaning in life again. The grief-informed funeral director conveys to families that if they are openly grieving and mourning, they are doing what they need to be doing.

Early Grief

Early grief is often a time of shock, numbness and disbelief. These natural psychological shock absorbers help keep griever's alive until they are ready to slowly absorb the full truth. In the immediate hours and days after a loss, families need understanding and supportive care. Grief-informed funeral directors are a lifeline during this time. They should also model empathy and holding space for whatever griever's are feeling and need to express.

Grief Symptoms

Grief symptoms are often muted in early grief because of the natural shock response. But any and all feelings and behaviors may arise, and if they arise, that means they are normal. The funeral director's role is to bear witness to these expressions, to listen without judgment or advice (unless advice is asked for) and to normalize. People in early grief often feel like they're going crazy. A grief-informed funeral di-

rector will affirm for grieving families that their thoughts, feelings and responses are normal and understandable, no matter what they are.

Six Needs of Mourning

While grief is unique, there are some central needs of mourning we have been able to identify:

1. Acknowledge the reality of the death.
2. Embrace the pain of the loss.
3. Remember the person who died.
4. Develop a new self-identity.
5. Search for meaning.
6. Reach out for and accept the support of others.

Thoroughly integrating these six needs naturally takes griever's many months and years. But the funeral itself should dose grieving families

with all six needs, setting them on a healthy long-term path to healing. The grief-informed funeral director knows that a full, personalized, public, elements-rich funeral provides the most opportunities to encounter the six needs. This reminds us that funerals are rites of initiation, not rites of closure.

Role of the Funeral

The funeral is intended to help the griever begin to acknowledge the reality of the death, recall the life, activate support, express grief into mourning, search for meaning and receive ongoing support. It is not meant to be convenient or fast. Instead, its purpose is to help griever's begin to make the long, difficult transition from life before the death to life after the death. The grief-informed funeral director embraces the true role of the funeral and helps support families in the creation of meaningful experiences.

Grief Misconceptions

Unknowingly, many families carry grief misconceptions with them into the arrangement conference. They might believe their job in that moment is to keep a stiff upper lip and carry on. They might think that it's better to get past the death as quickly as possible by minimizing elements of ceremony, if not eliminating the funeral. They might think it's better to have a “party” instead of a funeral. They might believe that grief has five orderly and predictable stages they need to get through as quickly as possible.

These and other culturally enforced miscon-

ceptions color the attitudes that guide their funeral planning. The grief-informed funeral director is aware of the misconceptions and appropriately offers insight and guidance.

Grief-Informed Funeral Directors

- Embrace the true role of the funeral and help support families in creating meaningful experiences.
- Are a lifeline to families during early grief.
- Affirm for grieving families that their thoughts, feelings and responses are normal and understandable, no matter what they are.
- Constantly work on refining the art of their helping skills.

Helping Skills

Perhaps it goes without saying that funeral home staff members must have excellent interpersonal skills. However, for those to whom it doesn't come quite as naturally, additional, ongoing training and mentoring can make all the difference. Active listening, eye contact, body language, tone of voice, appropriate paraphrasing and clarifying, open-ended questioning, sensitively reflecting feelings and effectively summarizing – these and more are the helping skills that together create empathetic, nurturing interactions for grieving families. The grief-informed funeral director is constantly working on refining the art of their helping skills.

Reconciliation

People don't "get over" grief. They don't "get past" it. Instead, if they grieve and mourn fully and authentically, they learn to live with it. They integrate the loss into their ongoing lives. They reconcile themselves to the loss and find ways to live with meaning and purpose without forgetting the person who died

and their love for them. The grief-informed funeral director knows that the road is long and helps families understand the six needs of mourning, which will be their guideposts on the path to reconciliation.

I hope you will join me in advocating for more ongoing grief education and training, not just for funeral directors but for everyone on staff. This should include staff sessions in which questions are discussed and different situations explored. Mistakes should be seen as opportunities for growth and continuous improvement. Even the most naturally gifted, on-point funeral directors need continued affirmation and education. There is no such thing as an overinformed funeral director! ☰

Dr. Alan Wolfelt is recognized as one of North America's leading death educators and grief counselors. His books on grief for both caregivers and grieving people have sold more than a million copies worldwide and are translated into many languages. Wolfelt is founder and director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition and a longtime consultant to funeral service. Contact him at drwolfelt@centerforloss.com.

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