

I DON'T CARE HOW LONG IT'S BEEN, can we talk about my child?

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We Need Not Walk Alone is the national newsletter of The Compassionate Friends. If you are like many bereaved individuals, you've felt that you have walked alone during much of your grief.

When bereaved parents find The Compassionate Friends, they meet other parents who share some of their pain. They discover there are people who will walk some or much of the way with them down the painful path of bereavement.

Since your child or grandchild died, have you found that your friends and relatives do not understand much of what you have been experiencing? Have they come to expect you to either be much better or over it?

Worse yet, have the people
in your life decided it is best
not to mention the name of
your child or even
acknowledge that your child
lived?

How could people be so cruel to never again utter the name? Why would someone do such a thing?

Many people in our society have come to believe that if they permit a person to grieve on and on, the result may be irreversible harm.

Phrases such as "he's stuck in his grief" or "she's wallowing in her grief" serve as false warnings to our friends and relatives that they should do nothing that will contribute to this condition.

Therefore, many people will not want to listen to a bereaved person's grief reactions because they believe talking about it makes it worse. As you know: this is not true.

Second, most people cannot handle the intense pain of a bereaved person for very long. Think of how long most of the people permitted your full expression of grief by not interrupting this process. One of the popular ways to interrupt a person in the midst of grieving behavior is to change to a safer subject.

Third, many people believe that bringing up anything that reminds the bereaved person of their loss will produce pain and grief where none existed before.

Most bereaved individuals learn that the best way to work through the bereavement process is to talk about their grief and their loved one.

Think about it. This is just the opposite way most of society behaves.

Therefore, the bereaved spouse, parent or child is placed in a quandary that goes something like this: "Should I behave the way that society expects and suppress my grief and my need to talk about my loved one, or should I go against what society says and be seen as someone who (supposedly) can't handle their grief?"

I suggest a third alternative. Why not find a way to encourage people in your life to talk about your child?

The following are some suggested steps to accomplish this:

1. Think of the people you are willing to contact to ask if they will talk about your child.
2. Decide how the contact will be made. In some cases, a phone call or a text out of the blue will work. You don't have to have a reason. Or you may want to contact some people in person. For others, you may want to compose an email. Whatever way you make your contact, the content of your request will basically be the same.
3. Your first words might go something like, "I was thinking of you the other day (you are thinking about this person now, right?) and I wanted to say a couple of things." This introduction is a great way to get a person's attention and to make it clear that you have a message to deliver.
4. Once you have their attention say, "Here's my first request. Sometimes when we talk on the phone or in person, it would really help me if you would mention something about my child by name. Okay?"
5. Then say, "My second request is that you tell me a story about my child." Many people have difficulty coming up with stories on the spot. To help with this, ask them to tell you a story about any of the following topics that may be related to your loved one's life:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Locations: vacations, shopping, school ✓ Outings: parties, picnics, concerts, sporting events ✓ Food: places/restaurants, meals/particular foods, smells ✓ Organizations/groups/clubs: scouts, sports, hobbies ✓ Emotional: embarrassing moments, funniest moments ✓ Media: books, television, movies ✓ Work experiences ✓ Spiritual Beliefs: church experiences, readings, prayers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ Relationships with others: children, parents, spouse, siblings, friends ✓ Values observed in your loved one, e.g. honesty, commitment, joy of living ✓ Support given to or received from your loved one ✓ Possessions: pets, toys, clothing, games, car ✓ Music: favorite songs, instruments ✓ Talents ✓ Holidays: New Year's, Valentine's Day, 4th of July, Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas/Hanukkah
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I must offer you a note of caution. Be prepared for times when you do not get the intended results. Let's look at what could go wrong even though you tried your best.

First, the person may not appear to understand you, whether intentionally or not. That is, you may make your two requests and find that nothing comes of it. In this case you can drop it or, during some other conversation, say something like, "Remember when I asked you if you would talk about my child and relate stories? Do you think you can do this?" Then be silent. Let the person reply and if they resist, all you can do is accept it. Second, some people will come right out and say that they just can't— that it's too painful. Third, other people may comply at first, but later fall off in their efforts.

Remember, most non-bereaved people are surprised to discover that the bereaved yearn to hear stories of their loved one. Don't let people's noncompliance stop you from asking others to help you with your requests. This is a vulnerable time in your life. Only take risks like this if you think you can handle rejection.

But remember, hearing the beautiful sound of your child's name and reliving stories of their life can be well worth the possibility of rejection. Your child's life, no matter how long or how short, touched many people.

As a bereaved individual, you have the right to hear from others the wonderful stories that have yet to be told. Keep asking and you may receive some precious gifts as a result of your efforts.