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THE RIGHT TO GRIEVE

A leaflet to help mentally handicapped people who are bereaved

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THE RIGHT TO GRIEVE

Grief following the death of a relative or friend is a very common and normal reaction and the help given by 'bereavement counselling' is now generally recognised. But the grief of people who are mentally handicapped is not always acknowledged to the same extent although they require support at this time of crisis in the same way as anyone else. They may be in particular need of help if they have always spent their lives at home with their parents and had little or no preparation for the changes that the death of a parent will bring.

Neighbours, friends, relatives and professionals may themselves need help in supporting a mentally handicapped person at this time of grief and crisis. Staff who are going to be very closely involved in trying to help may also need guidance to gain insight into the problems of the grieving person. Staff may feel anxiety as they try to help and wonder how much the mentally handicapped person needs to know about death and what sort of explanations can be given and how far the mentally handicapped person's right to know should be respected. They may be distressed as they help the bereaved person and share with them the enormity of their loss. It is not easy to talk about death, and, if the mentally handicapped person is also very dependent and has special problems due to lack of speech, blindness, deafness or physical incapacity, the carers might feel even more at a loss to know how they can most sensitively be helped.

SHARING

It is important that everyone is aware of what has happened.

How do you get to know about the death of somebody close to a mentally handicapped person?

How does the mentally handicapped person get to know?

How much detail of the circumstances do you think that you need to know in order to help?

REACTING

It is important to remember that people respond in different ways.

Are you aware of possible reactions to bereavement?

Would you expect a person who is mentally handicapped to react in any different way?

HELPING

It is important to recognise that the necessary support can come from a variety of people.

How do you and the mentally handicapped person talk together about death?

Do you talk about it?

Do you feel personally able to help?

Do you think that the person you are trying to help might have additional problems in understanding what has happened?

Will he or she need any special help?

CARING

Giving support and sympathy is not easy. A discussion with other people can be helpful.

What are your feelings and what additional help is available to you?

What sort of help would you like?

Have you talked about this problem to other people so that you can all try to understand a bereaved person's grief in a helpful manner?

Perhaps an informal bereavement support group, made up of interested and sympathetic people, would be valuable. Have you thought of how such an informal group might be started amongst staff, families and friends?

This leaflet has been produced by a group concerned that the needs and grief reactions of bereaved mentally handicapped people are likely to be overlooked. It is hoped that this leaflet will be helpful in promoting discussion. A discussion document is being prepared and your comments will be welcomed.

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