

Supporting the bereaved by telephone

The current situation means that pastoral support will not be face to face. This is especially difficult in the event of bereavement where normally we would make a home visit. Phone support is obviously much more difficult, but it is better than no contact.

So

- It is a natural reaction to say “I was not trained for this”.
- It is important not to be too hard on ourselves if we find this challenging, but also to recognise that we can grow with experience.

Basics in pastoral care by phone

- It's important to introduce yourself and say why you are calling. Be aware that you may need to explain more than once.
- It's about their story and not about your story. You do not know just how they feel
- The shock of loss can be overwhelming and completely disorientating and exhausting
- Just LISTEN! Don't attempt to solve problems, though you may need to talk about a service. Listening can of course include 'active listening' – i.e. occasional recap questions to check understanding / show you're still there / show empathy, or the odd appropriate short comment or noise... but the default position is to shut up, and just be there, listening. Don't rush to fill pauses.
- Tone of voice –when you are speaking on the phone, obviously body language is out of the picture, so the next highest % of communication is tone (the words themselves are far smaller). For face to face support, body language is even more important.
- Aim to speak less and listen more.
- Name the fact that you don't have words for what has happened.
- Aim for empathy more than for sympathy. Check yourself that you are not sounding patronising. Bereaved people do not need to be infantilised.
- Notice rather than diagnose – “that sounds really hard” rather than “you must be feeling x, y or z”
- Attention span may be short. Offer to call again, but only if you are going to do so.
- Normal safeguarding principles apply

Useful questions

- Is it ok for you to talk now or would you prefer me to call back?
- Do you mind if I ask about ...(the deceased)?.....what happened?.....their story?...what did they really enjoy? Should I be picturing an outgoing person or someone who preferred their own company? etc
- Do you have other people who are supporting you/ with you?

- You are in my prayers. Would you like me to say a prayer now or would you prefer not?

If planning a service

- Acknowledge that the current situation makes things doubly difficult and explain that the service will be shorter than usual [we may move to a situation where the number of mourners are reduced to zero]. Use the resources produced by +Robert for services and pastoral support.
- Within the constraints of time, still try to make the plan personal to the deceased
- Offer to send the order of service or any words you might have used after the service by email or post (often the Funeral Directors will produce an Order of Service)
- Recap what you think you have heard or any arrangements you have agreed. Grief is exhausting and disorientating.
- Be aware that, when things are happening that bereaved people can't control, it is natural to become overly concerned with details that can be controlled.
- Be aware that the bereaved person may not know what to expect at the crematorium or graveside. Ask if they would like you to talk them through it.
- Check if there is anyone else you should be liaising with.
- Ensure that they have your contact details.
- Reassure them that you are happy to talk further (assuming that you are) >

Caring for yourself

- This work is draining. Be kind to yourself
- It's ok to say to someone who is supporting you "I found that really hard". To do so is not a sign of weakness
- Prayer support – you might ask a couple of people to pray for you as you make a call or prepare to conduct a funeral, but be aware of confidentiality issues.
- Don't take expressions of anger against God, the Church or yourself personally.
- Do take seriously your own feelings of sadness/anger/disorientation. It's not unusual or weak to be affected by trauma and tragedy.
- Don't be surprised by a delayed reaction in yourself. We often cope in a crisis and the pain/shock hits a little later.
- Beware the danger of being energised by this work and the hitting the wall. Try to stop before you feel you need to.
- Try to get more sleep and rest and to keep to a routine as much as possible.
- Find someone you can debrief with – a colleague, cell group, chapter

Others sources of support

- The Diocese provides a completely confidential counselling service <https://exeter.anglican.org/resources/pastoral-care-counselling/>
- We also offer Reflective Practice Groups for clergy. Some are working by Zoom – for more details email philip.sourbut@exeter.anglican.org
- Links to other local and national, secular and church mental health and wellbeing resources are here: <https://exeter.anglican.org/resources/faith-action/mentalhealth/>