

# FAMILY REUNION INSTITUTE'S

## STICKY REUNION SITUATION

### FAMILY GRIEF AT THE REUNION

February 2018

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#### The Situation:

What's the best way to deal with family grief during the reunion? We've had several deaths in our family recently and our planning team would like to do something during the upcoming reunion to not just honor our deceased, but to help those who are grieving. Do you have any suggestions for what we could do?

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#### The Fix:



**Anita  
Pernell-Arnold**

Reactions to death and grief are true and natural. At a deep level we all need to understand and accept that we all have experienced the death of someone we cared about, and most of all—we all will die. Whether we heal from the loss of a loved one or become lost in a place of despair or hopelessness is, in part, determined by seeing and knowing how our family grieves. A first Path to healing is talking, of which there is almost never too much. Talking about the person, how the family felt about them, describing feelings, thoughts and pain; sharing experiences with each other whether or not family members are feeling the same things.

A second Path is to set up a small quiet room, if possible, with flowers, music, with books on grief, which family members can visit when they feel the need. Include pretty notepaper on which people can write thoughts and messages and possibly leave for others to read. Make a scrapbook which can become part of the family history and wisdom. The objective is to encourage the family to go through grief, not avoid it, recognizing and sharing their feelings.

A third Path is memorializing the person by telling memorable stories, problems they faced, achievements and accomplishments, and whatever family members feel is important. Include information about the person's hobbies, art, music, volunteering, recipes, music, and poems she or he enjoyed. Ask family members about ways to memorialize the person. (This can also become a way to recognize people while they are alive.)

A fourth Path is the inclusion of a dedication (not a funeral) in any church or religious service the family may attend during the Family Reunion. It is important for this to be short. Family reunions are to celebrate the life and history of the family and each person's contribution to it. Therefore it may be wise to include children on these Paths. Parental discretion of course!

Lastly, a small committee can be established to plan and expand this program so that no opportunity or person is missed.

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**Anita Pernell-Arnold** MSSW, ACSW, CPRP retired, Founding Fellow PRA  
Author of *"Paths Through Despair to Gratitude and Faith"*  
Access to the book is: Amazon.com [www.createspace.com/4748691](http://www.createspace.com/4748691)

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Suggested books by people experiencing grief (all available on Amazon.com)

- Bozarth, All Renee. A Journey through Grief. Center City, MN: Hazelden Publishing, 1990.
  - Claypool, J.R. Tracks of a Fellow Struggler, Living and Growing Through Grief. (loss of a child). New Orleans, LA: Insight Press. 1995.
  - Curry, Cathleen, L. When Your Spouse Dies. Notre Dame, IN: Ave Maria Press, 1990
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## The Fix:



**Doug Harris**

It almost goes without saying that a memorial of some sort would be appropriate, whether a moment of silence or time set aside for people to speak about their memories of the deceased. On the other hand, helping those who are grieving can take many more forms. It not only depends on the individual personalities of those who are grieving, but also on the stage of grief they are in. In the process of helping, all have to understand that you never try to tell a person how they should grieve or how they should feel. I suggest reunion planners contact anyone who is grieving before the reunion to see:

1. Whether they plan to attend;
2. If so, who they will be traveling with;
3. Whether they wish to speak before the moment of silence, or make remarks during the memorial;
4. Whether they will be ready to hear personal condolences from family during the reunion, or prefer that everyone restrain from offering condolences until they are in a place to receive them. If restraint is preferred, be sure to announce this preference to the family before the reunion, preferably by email or Facebook.
5. If there is someone they would particularly like to reach out to during the reunion, then facilitate that request.
6. If there is someone in the family who is a faith leader or grief counselor, check to see if they are coming to the reunion and would be willing to meet privately during the reunion to process/work through grief issues, and if not, would they be willing to speak with the grieving family member(s) via telephone or email.

The bottom line is try to be helpful without being intrusive, and remember that grieving people remember your presence more than what you say.

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## The Fix:



**Suzanne  
Vargus Holloman**

Doug's response is very comprehensive! One other possibility is that since there are several family members that have recently lost loved ones, consider a group session for those who are grieving. It could be led by a family member who is a faith leader or counselor. The group session could be at a time when there isn't a formal activity. Of course, the session would be optional. It could be open to anyone that would like to participate. There may be family members that would like to participate even if their loved one passed several years ago.

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