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THECLIENT

Comforting the Bereft

WHEN A CLIENT OR PROSPECT IS GRIEVING THE DEATH OF A LOVED ONE, HOW YOU COME ACROSS CAN MAKE THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN ALIENATION AND LIFELONG LOYALTY. BY AMY FLORIAN

Maya Angelou wrote: "People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

This is particularly true for financial planners who serve clients after the death of a loved one. More than they will remember how proficient you were with their money at the time, these clients or prospects will always remember how you made them feel in the process.

FRAGILE STATE

Although the funeral may be over, the grief continues. Given the often fragile emotional state of bereaved people, reorganizing their financial affairs is a difficult task for them to undertake.

A sensitive financial advisor who can blend technical expertise with a solid emotional presence can be a tremendous boon to the grieving. That's because the advisor is helping them to take a major step toward getting on with their lives.

Your demeanor and interaction with grief-stricken clients have long-term financial repercussions for you and your client. The stark fact is that 70% of widows switch financial advisors after their husbands die. How do you handle these situations wisely, so you help clients and retain their business?

The first part seems easy enough. You know the monetary impact of these losses. You can help navigate insurance claims, estate issues, unexpected financial needs and more. You can work out a financial plan that is retooled to a client's new circumstances.

The second need is what complicates things, however. Clients may be deeply enmeshed in grieving—a complex process that involves letting go of a cherished person, building a memory out of what can no longer be and moving into a future that will be quite different from what they had planned.They are likely to be deeply emotional, with underlying feelings of vulnerability, insecurity and doubt.

TISSUE ETIQUETTE

So where do you start? One place is understanding "tissue etiquette." Common courtesy says that when someone starts to cry, you hand them a tissue. Although most people believe this is helpful, in reality it sends an unintended message: "You are making me uncomfortable. Dry your tears."

Consider the difference if you use this approach: Keep a box of tissues on your desk within the client's easy reach. When a client gets watery-eyed or reaches for a purse (a sure sign a woman is looking for her own tissues), simply look over at the box and say, "You can use my tissues if you'd like. It's up to you."

By making this gesture, you are sending clients an implied message: You're comfortable with their tears. They have permission to feel whatever they're feeling. You can follow up by saying, "People feel they need to apologize when they cry. But it takes real courage to face up to your emotions."

waste of valuable hours, it will help to form or strengthen a bond with your client and pay off handsomely in the long run through loyalty and referrals.

As you listen to grieving clients, avoid making another common error. To make people feel better, many try to frame the loss in the best possible light. People say things like, "You should be grateful he went so fast. He didn't have to suffer," or "At least he's not in pain anymore." Also, people try to establish a connection with a grieving person and let them know they understand their experience. So we say things like, "I know exactly how you feel."

This immediately alienates your clients. Well-meaning attempts to help them feel better actually make them feel that you are minimizing or denying their pain. They hear you telling them how they should feel, rather than asking them how they actually do feel.

In such instances, your clients will know avoid talking with them and change the subject whenever they start to tell their story. So don't act like most people do. Lean in toward your clients. Look them directly in the eye and give them your full attention. A sympathetic nod goes a long way, as does saying something like, "Oh, that must have been hard for you."

• **Take notes to keep in your files.** Your note-taking tells clients their story is important to you. It also helps you to keep track of the important information you are gathering to help them.

• **Find a meaningful moment.** You greatly boost the rapport by referring to something from this conversation in a subsequent phone call or meeting, .

• **Reinforce the idea that you truly want to understand.** Repeat or refer to something the client said, either in the exact words or a paraphrase. Then ask for clarification or what happened next. React without judging or criticizing.

By listening and responding in the right way, you can let clients know you care. You also gain valuable business information about what makes them tick.

ATTENTIVE LISTENING

These words need to be accompanied by genuine compassion, patience and a willingness to listen. Whenever you make an appointment with grieving clients, allow extra time. And be prepared for the possibility that the initial meeting may not be productive in the usual sense.

With a prospective client, you naturally want to secure a formal agreement and begin work by recommending investment strategies and getting them in place. But in the case of traumatic, unexpected or recent deaths, the client may not be emotionally capable of doing so and should not be pushed.

In those cases, concentrate on doing only those things that simply must be done immediately and spend the rest of your time listening to the client. Although it may seem like a you don't understand them, and they begin to question whether they can really trust you. The idea is to validate their experience, not minimize it.

Ask your clients to tell their story, to describe their feelings and to name things that are hardest about the loss.Tell them you can't imagine what it must be like for them and encourage them to tell you more.

By listening and responding in the right way, you can let them know you care. You also gain valuable business information because you learn what makes them tick, what kinds of things are important in their lives, what their dreams and hopes are and even what their risk tolerance is. Some tips for this type of interaction:

• **Look them in the eye.** Grieving clients are used to having people avert their eyes,

• **Use soft and kind words.** Always give grieving clients the benefit of the doubt, even if you disagree with what they say. The value of this type of listening cannot be overestimated.

Your clients feel invisible in our death-denying society. When you listen to them tell their stories, you help them to heal, and at the same time, serve them more effectively. After all, every grieving client will have friends and associates whose loved ones will die. When that happens, what will these clients tell them about you? They'll tell them how you made them feel. FP

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