

Supporting A Grieving Person

It can be tough to know what to say or do when someone you care about is grieving. It's common to feel helpless, awkward, or unsure. You may be afraid of intruding, saying the wrong thing, or making the person feel even worse. Or maybe you feel there's little you can do to make things better.

While you can't take away the pain of the loss, you *can* provide much-needed comfort and support. There are many ways to help a grieving friend or family member, starting with letting the person know you care.

What you need to know about bereavement and grief

The death of a loved one is one of life's most difficult experiences. The bereaved struggle with many intense and frightening emotions, including depression, anger, and guilt. Often, they feel isolated and alone in their grief. Having someone to lean on can help them through the grieving process.

Don't let discomfort prevent you from reaching out to someone who is grieving. Now, more than ever, your support is needed. You might not know exactly what to say or what to do, but that's okay. You don't need to have answers or give advice. The most important thing you can do for a grieving person is to simply be there. Your support and caring presence will help them cope with the pain and begin to heal.

Understanding the bereavement process

The better your understanding of grief and how it is healed, the better equipped you'll be to help a bereaved friend or family member:

- **There is no right or wrong way to grieve.** Grief does not always unfold in orderly, predictable stages. It can be an emotional rollercoaster, with unpredictable highs, lows, and setbacks. Everyone grieves differently, so avoid telling the bereaved what they "should" be feeling or doing.
- **Grief may involve extreme emotions and behaviors.** Feelings of guilt, anger, despair, and fear are common. A grieving person may yell to the heavens, obsess about the death, lash out at loved ones, or cry for hours on end. The bereaved need reassurance that what they're feeling is normal. Don't judge them or take their grief reactions personally.
- **There is no set timetable for grieving.** For many people, recovery after bereavement takes 18 to 24 months, but for others, the grieving process may be longer or shorter. Don't pressure the bereaved to move on or make them feel like they've been grieving too long. This can actually slow their healing.

What to say to someone who has lost a loved one

It is common to feel awkward when trying to comfort someone who is grieving. Many people do not know what to say or do. The following are suggestions to use as a guide.

- Acknowledge the situation. Example: "I heard that your _____ died." Use the word "died" That will show that you are more open to talk about how the person really feels.
- Express your concern. Example: "I'm sorry to hear that this happened to you."
- Be genuine in your communication and don't hide your feelings. Example: "I'm not sure what to say, but I want you to know I care."
- Offer your support. Example: "Tell me what I can do for you."
- Ask how he or she feels, and don't assume you know how the bereaved person feels on any given day.

Helping a grieving person tip 1: Listen with compassion

Almost everyone worries about what to say to people who are grieving. But knowing how to listen is much more important. Oftentimes, well-meaning people avoid talking about the death or mentioning the deceased person. However, the bereaved need to feel that their loss is acknowledged, it's not too terrible to talk about, and their loved one won't be forgotten.

While you should never try to force someone to open up, it's important to let the bereaved know they have permission to talk about the loss. Talk candidly about the person who died and don't steer away from the subject if the deceased's name comes up. When it seems appropriate, ask sensitive questions – without being nosy – that invite the grieving person to openly express his or her feelings. Try simply asking, "Do you feel like talking?"

- **Accept and acknowledge all feelings.** Let the grieving person know that it's okay to cry in front of you, to get angry, or to break down. Don't try to reason with them over how they should or shouldn't feel. The bereaved should feel free to express their feelings, without fear of judgment, argument, or criticism.
- **Be willing to sit in silence.** Don't press if the grieving person doesn't feel like talking. You can offer comfort and support with your silent presence. If you can't think of something to say, just offer eye contact, a squeeze of the hand, or a reassuring hug.
- **Let the bereaved talk about how their loved one died.** People who are grieving may need to tell the story over and over again, sometimes in minute detail. Be patient. Repeating the story is a way of processing and accepting the death. With each retelling, the pain lessens.
- **Offer comfort and reassurance without minimizing the loss.** Tell the bereaved that what they're feeling is okay. If you've gone through a similar loss, share your own experience if you think it would help. However, don't give unsolicited advice, claim to "know" what the person is feeling, or compare your grief to theirs.

Comments to avoid when comforting the bereaved

- **"I know how you feel."** One can never know how another may feel. You could, instead, ask your friend to tell you how he or she feels.
- **"It's part of God's plan."** This phrase can make people angry and they often respond with, "What plan? Nobody told me about any plan."
- **"Look at what you have to be thankful for."** They know they have things to be thankful for, but right now they are not important.
- **"He's in a better place now."** The bereaved may or may not believe this. Keep your beliefs to yourself unless asked.
- **"This is behind you now; it's time to get on with your life."** Sometimes the bereaved are resistant to getting on with because they feel this means "forgetting" their loved one. In addition, moving on is easier said than done. Grief has a mind of its own and works at its own pace.
- **Statements that begin with "You should" or "You will."** These statements are too directive. Instead you could begin your comments with: "Have you thought about. . ." or "You might. . ."

Helping a grieving person tip 2: Offer practical assistance

It is difficult for many grieving people to ask for help. They might feel guilty about receiving so much attention, fear being a burden, or be too depressed to reach out. You can make it easier for them by making specific suggestions – such as, "I'm going to the market this afternoon. What can I bring you from there?" or "I've made beef stew for dinner. When can I come by and bring you some?"

Consistency is very helpful, if you can manage it – being there for as long as it takes. This helps the grieving person look forward to your attentiveness without having to make the additional effort of asking again and again. You can also convey an open invitation by saying, "Let me know what I can do," which may make a grieving person feel more comfortable about asking for help. But keep in mind that the bereaved may not have the energy or motivation to call you when they need something, so it's better if you take the initiative to check in.

Be the one who takes the initiative

There are many practical ways you can help a grieving person. You can offer to:

- Shop for groceries or run errands
- Drop off a casserole or other type of food
- Help with funeral arrangements
- Stay in their home to take phone calls and receive guests
- Help with insurance forms or bills
- Take care of housework, such as cleaning or laundry
- Watch their children or pick them up from school
- Drive them wherever they need to go
- Look after their pets

- Go with them to a support group meeting
- Accompany them on a walk
- Take them to lunch or a movie
- Share an enjoyable activity (game, puzzle, art project)

Helping a grieving person tip 3: Provide ongoing support

Grieving continues long after the funeral is over and the cards and flowers have stopped. The length of the grieving process varies from person to person. But in general, grief lasts much longer than most people expect. Your bereaved friend or family member may need your support for months or even years.

- **Continue your support over the long haul.** Stay in touch with the grieving person, periodically checking in, dropping by, or sending letters or cards. Your support is more valuable than ever once the funeral is over, the other mourners are gone, and the initial shock of the loss has worn off.
- **Don't make assumptions based on outward appearances.** The bereaved person may look fine on the outside, while inside he or she is suffering. Avoid saying things like "You are so strong" or "You look so well." This puts pressure on the person to keep up appearances and to hide his or her true feelings.
- **The pain of bereavement may never fully heal.** Be sensitive to the fact that life may never feel the same. You don't "get over" the death of a loved one. The bereaved person may learn to accept the loss. The pain may lessen in intensity over time. But the sadness may never completely go away.
- **Offer extra support on special days.** Certain times and days of the year will be particularly hard for your grieving friend or family member. Holidays, family milestones, birthdays, and anniversaries often reawaken grief. Be sensitive on these occasions. Let the bereaved person know that you're there for whatever he or she needs.

Helping a grieving person tip 4: Watch for warning signs

It's common for a grieving person to feel depressed, confused, disconnected from others, or like they're going crazy. But if the bereaved person's symptoms don't gradually start to fade – or they get worse with time – this may be a sign that normal grief has evolved into a more serious problem, such as clinical depression.

Encourage the grieving person to seek professional help if you observe any of the following warning signs after the initial grieving period – especially if it's been over two months since the death.

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| • Difficulty functioning in daily life | • Inability to enjoy life |
| • Extreme focus on the death | • Hallucinations |
| • Excessive bitterness, anger, or guilt | • Withdrawing from others |

- Neglecting personal hygiene
- Alcohol or drug abuse
- Constant feelings of hopelessness
- Talking about dying or suicide

It can be tricky to bring up your concerns to the bereaved person. You don't want to be perceived as invasive. Instead of telling the person what to do, try stating your own feelings: *"I am troubled by the fact that you aren't sleeping – perhaps you should look into getting help."*

Take talk of suicide very seriously

If a grieving friend or family member talks about suicide or wanting to join the deceased, get professional help right away. **IN A LIFE-THREATENING EMERGENCY, CALL 911.**

EAP (Associates in Counseling 608-782-1117)

Suicide Prevention Lifeline 1-800-273-TALK (8255)

*Adapted from http://www.helpguide.org/mental/helping_grieving.htm

