

Supporting a Grieving Person

It's often hard to know what to say or do when someone you care about is grieving. You may be afraid of 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.

Understand the grieving process

- There is no right or wrong way to grieve.
- Grief may involve extreme emotions and behaviors.
- There is no set timetable for grieving.

What to say to someone who has lost a loved one

- 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 tips

1. **Listen with compassion** - Try simply asking, "Do you feel like talking?"
 - Accept and acknowledge all feelings
 - Be willing to sit in silence
 - Let the bereaved talk about how his or her loved one died
 - Offer comfort and reassurance without minimizing the loss

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.
- "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" his or her 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. . ."

2. Offer practical assistance - 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 his or her home to take phone calls and receive guests
- Help with insurance forms or bills
- Take care of housework, such as cleaning or laundry
- Watch his or her children or pick them up from school
- Drive him or her wherever he or she needs to go
- Look after his or her 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)

3. Provide ongoing support - Your bereaved friend or family member may need your support for months or even years.

- Continue your support - Stay in touch with the grieving person
- Don't make assumptions based on outward appearances - The bereaved person may look fine on the outside, while inside he or she is suffering
- The pain of bereavement may never fully heal - Be sensitive to the fact that life may never feel the same
- Offer extra support on special days - Holidays, birthdays, and anniversaries

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

4. Watch for warning signs

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.

- Difficulty functioning in daily life
- Extreme focus on the death
- Excessive bitterness, anger, or guilt
- Neglecting personal hygiene
- Alcohol or drug abuse
- Inability to enjoy life
- Hallucinations
- Withdrawing from others
- Constant feelings of hopelessness
- Talking about dying or suicide

It can be tricky to bring up your concerns to the bereaved person as 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.”*

Supporting a child through grief and bereavement

Even very young children feel the pain of bereavement, but they learn how to express his or her grief by watching the adults around them. After a loss – particularly of a sibling or parent – children need support, stability, and honesty. They may also need extra reassurance that they will be cared for and kept safe. As an adult, you can support children through the grieving process by demonstrating that it’s okay to be sad and helping them make sense of the loss.

Answer any questions the child may have as truthfully as you can. Use very simple, honest, and concrete terms when explaining death to a child. Children—especially young children—may blame themselves for what happened and the truth helps them see they are not at fault.

Open communication will smooth the way for a child to express distressing feelings. Because children often express themselves through stories, games, and artwork, encourage this self-expression, and look for clues in those activities about how they are coping.

How to help a grieving child:

- Allow your child, however young, to attend the funeral if he or she wants to.
- Convey your spiritual values about life and death, or pray with your child.
- Meet regularly as a family to find out how everyone is coping.
- Help children find ways to symbolize and memorialize the deceased person.
- Keep your child's daily routine as normal as possible.
- Pay attention to the way a child plays; this can be one of a child's primary ways of communicating.

What not to do:

- Don't force a child to publicly mourn if he or she doesn't want to.
- Don't give false or confusing messages, like "Grandma is sleeping now."
- Don't tell a child to stop crying because others might get upset.
- Don't try to shield a child from the loss. Children pick up on much more than adults realize. Including them in the grieving process will help them adapt and heal.
- Don't stifle your tears; by crying in front of your child, you send the message that it's okay for him or her to express feelings, too.
- Don't turn your child into your personal confidante. Rely on another adult or a support group instead.

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