

How to Help Grieving People

What You Can Say, What You Can Do

Relatives, friends and neighbors are supportive at the time of a death, during the wake and funeral. Food, flowers and physical presence are among the many thoughtful expressions. After the funeral, however, many grieving people wonder what happened to their friends. They need their support and caring even more when the reality begins to hit and the long process of grief begins. Their help is essential since immediate family members have their hands full of grief and may find it difficult to give support to one another, or may not live nearby. Your help and understanding can make a significant difference in the healing of another's grief. Unresolved grief can lead to physical or mental illness, suicide or premature death. A grieving person needs friends willing to cry with them, sit with them, care, listen, have creative ideas for coping, be honest, help them feel loved and needed, and believe they will make it through their grief. Ways of helping grieving people are as limitless as your imagination.

Read about the various phases of grief so you can understand and help the bereaved to understand.

All that is necessary is a hand squeeze, a kiss, a hug, your presence. If you want to say something, say "I'm sorry" or "I care."

It is not necessary to ask questions about how the death happened. Let the bereaved tell you as much as they want when they are ready. A helpful question might be, "Would you like to talk about the death? I'll listen." Don't say, "I know just how you feel."

The bereaved may ask "Why?" It is often a cry of pain rather than a question. It is not necessary to answer, but if you do, you may reply, "I don't know why. Maybe we'll never know (this side of heaven)."

Don't use platitudes like "Life is for living," or "It's God's will." Explanations rarely console. It's better to say nothing.

Recognize the bereaved may be angry. They may be angry at God, the person who died, the clergy, doctors, rescue teams, other family members, etc. Encourage them to acknowledge their anger and to find ways of handling it.

It is good to cry. Crying is a release. People should not say, "Don't cry."

Be available to listen frequently. Most bereaved want to talk about the person who has died. Encourage them to talk about the deceased. Do not change the conversation or avoid mentioning the person's name. Talking about the pain slowly lessens its sting. Your concern and effort can make a big difference in helping someone recover from grief.

Be patient. Don't say, "You'll get over it in time." Mourning may take a long time. They will never stop missing the person who has died, but time will soften the hurt. The bereaved need you to stand by them for as long as possible. Encourage them to be patient with themselves as there is no timetable for grieving.

Offer to help with practical matters such as errands, fixing food, caring for children. Say, "I'm going to the store. Do you need bread, milk, etc.?" "It is not helpful to say, "Call me if there is anything I can do."

Accept whatever feelings are expressed. Do not say, "You shouldn't feel like that." This attitude puts pressure on the bereaved to push down their feelings. Encourage them to express their feelings —cry, hit a pillow, scream, etc.

Be aware the average person's self-esteem, on a scale of 100, is in the 70's. A bereaved person's self-esteem may be in the teens or lower.

When someone feels guilty and is filled with "If only...", it merely adds to their negative view of themselves to say "Don't feel guilty." They would handle it better if they could. Listen with true concern. One response could be, "I don't think you're guilty. You did the best you could at the time, but don't push down your feeling of guilt. Look at these feelings and talk about guilt until you can let go."

Depression is often part of grief. It is a scary feeling. To be able to talk things over with an understanding friend or loved one is one factor that may help a person not to become severely depressed.

From *The Joy of Not Knowing It All*
"There ain't no answer.
There ain't going to be any answer.
There never has been an answer.
That's the answer."
Gertrude Stein

Give special attention to the children in the family. Do not tell them not to cry or not to upset the adults. Do not shield the children from the grieving of others. It is important to have them express their own feelings, as the adults in the family have their hands full with their own grief.

Suggest the bereaved person keep a daily journal.

The bereaved may appear to be getting worse. This is often due to the reality of death hitting them.

Physical reactions to the death (lack of appetite, sleeplessness, headaches, inability to concentrate) affect a person's coping ability, energy and recovery.

Be aware of the use of drugs and alcohol. Often they only delay the grief response. Medication should only be taken under the supervision of a physician.

Sometimes the pain of bereavement is so intense that thoughts of suicide occur. Don't be shocked by this. Instead, try to be a truly confiding friend.

Don't say, "It has been four months (six months, a year, etc.). You must be over it by now." Life will never be the same.

Encourage counseling if grief is getting out of hand.

Suggest grieving people take part in support groups such as Hope for Widowed, Hope for Bereaved Parents, and Hope for Survivors, or Those Whom Suicide Leaves Behind. Sharing similar experiences helps. Offer to attend a support group meeting with them. The meetings are not morbid. They offer understanding, friendship, suggestions for coping and hope.

Suggest major decisions be can be postponed (moving, giving everything away, etc.) Later they may regret hasty decisions. It is best to keep decision-making to a minimum.

Suggest exercise to help work off bottled- up tension and anger, to relax and to aid sleep. Offer to join them in tennis, aerobic exercise classes, swimming, a walk, etc.

Encourage the bereaved to balance life (rest, reading, work, prayer and recreation).

Encourage good nutrition. If they have trouble sleeping, suggest avoiding cola, coffee, tea or aspirin-based remedies containing caffeine.

Help the bereaved to not have unrealistic expectations as to how they "should" feel and when they will be better. It is helpful, when appropriate, to say, "I don't know how you do as well as you do."

Don't avoid the bereaved. It adds to their loss. As the widowed often say, "I not only lost my spouse, but my friends as well."

Be aware that weekends, holidays and evenings may be more difficult.

Consider sending a note at the time of their loved one's birthday, anniversary of death, special days.

Practice continuing acts of thoughtfulness—a note, visit, plant, helpful book on grief, plate of cookies, phone call, invitation for lunch, dinner, coffee. Take the initiative in calling the bereaved.