

Helping a Grieving Friend



Relatives, friends and neighbors are supportive at the time of a death, during the wake and funeral. Food, flowers and their presence are among the many thoughtful expressions. After the funeral, 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 your friend's grief. Unresolved grief can lead to physical or mental illness, suicide or premature death. A grieving person needs friends who are willing to: LISTEN; cry with them; sit with them; reminisce; care; have creative ideas for coping; be honest; help them feel loved and needed; believe that they will make it through their grief.

Ways of helping grieving people are a limitless as your imagination.

1. All that is necessary is a squeeze of the hand, a kiss, a hug, your presence. If you want to say something, say, "I'm sorry" or "I care."
2. Offer to help with practical matters; i.e., errands, fixing food, caring for children. Say "I'm going to the store. Do you need bread, milk, etc.? I'll get them." It is not helpful to say, "Call me if there is anything I can do."
3. Don't be afraid to cry openly if you were close to the deceased. Often the bereaved find themselves comforting you, but at the same time they understand your tears and don't feel so alone in their grief.
4. 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? I'll listen."
5. Don't say, "I know just how you feel."
6. 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."
7. Don't use platitudes like "Life is for the living," or "It's God's will." Explanations rarely console. It is better to say nothing.
8. Recognize that 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 healthy ways of handling it.
9. 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.

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10. Read about the various phases of grief so you can understand and help the bereaved to understand.
11. Be PATIENT. Don't say, "You will get over it in time." Mourning may take a long time. The bereaved need you to stand by them for as long as necessary. Encourage them to be patient with themselves as there is no timetable for grief.
12. 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.
13. Be aware that a bereaved person's self-esteem may be very low.
14. When someone feels guilt and is filled with "if only", it is not helpful to say, "Don't feel guilt." This only adds to their negative view of themselves. They would handle it better if they could. One response could be, "I don't think that you are guilty. You did the best you could at the time, but don't push down your feelings of guilt. Talk about it until you can let it go."
15. 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 prevent a person from becoming severely depressed.
16. Give special attention to the children in the family. DO NOT tell them not to cry or not to upset the adults.
17. Suggest that the bereaved person keep a journal.
18. The bereaved may appear to be getting worse. Be aware this is often due to the reality of the death hitting them.
19. Be aware of the physical reactions to the death (lack of appetite, sleeplessness, headaches, inability to concentrate). These affect the person's coping ability, energy and recovery.
20. Be aware of the use of drugs and alcohol. Medication should only be taken under the supervision of a physician. Often these only delay the grief response.
21. 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.
22. Don't say, "It's been 4 months, 6 months, 1 year, etc. You must be over it by now." Life will never be the same.