

How to Support Someone Who is Grieving

Every one of us will face the death of someone we know at some point in our lives. For the bereaved person, grief can feel incredibly lonely and overwhelming. When someone you care about loses someone, they need your consideration and support more than ever. It may be difficult to know what to say or how to offer solace and support, especially if you have never experienced the death of someone yourself. Everyone's experience of grief is different. What they need may change as time passes. While there is no perfect way to respond, this handout provides some basic practical tips on how to show compassion for someone who is grieving as well as some things to avoid.

Ways to give support to someone who is grieving:

Reach out

If someone you know is grieving a recent loss, reach out to them as soon as possible after the death and acknowledge the loss. We may be afraid of saying the wrong thing so we may say nothing or even avoid the bereaved person which can leave them feeling isolated and alone. How you reach out and what you may say will depend on the specific situation and your relationship with the person who is grieving. Saying "I am so sorry" or "I am thinking of you" is enough if you cannot think of anything else. Don't let fear hold you back.

Be present and be a good listener

Sometimes the best thing you can offer to someone who is grieving is to listen to them. If you know the person well, you might ask them directly if they would like to talk. Be prepared to hear some raw emotions. Your natural tendency may be to try and make the person feel better or tell them not to cry or suggest they should cry, but grief is not a problem to be fixed or changed. There is no way of making it better. Often we offer quick fixes or minimize a person's feelings because of our own discomfort in watching them grieve. You may also be thinking about your own personal experiences with grief. Do not assume you know how they are feeling. Let the grieving person take the lead. Be mindful of the amount of talking you are doing compared to the amount of listening. As people process their grief they go through many different experiences. Some people may not express their grief in the conventional way we may think of as sadness. Listen to their unique thoughts and feelings and express compassion for what they are experiencing in their grief. Let the person know it is okay to talk about their feelings when they are ready, if they wish to do so, and accept if they do not. Don't force a conversation. The griever's desire to confide may vary from day to day and over time. Make space for them to express their feelings without necessarily feeling the need to intervene. This sometimes may also include sitting in silence with the person who is grieving. Know that a grieving person may need to tell the story of what happened over and over again. It helps them to make sense of the loss. Keep anything they share with you confidential unless you have their explicit permission to share it.

Respect the person's method of grieving

Grief is a very personal experience and every loss is different. The type of relationship, the length of time people knew each other, the suddenness of the loss, and how the person died can affect someone's response. Different cultures also have different traditions. The grieving person may feel fine one minute and be overcome by emotion the next. Mood swings can be part of the process of grieving. People grieve differently and in ways you may not always expect. They may express anger or forget important dates or miss plans. You may think you would react differently if it had happened to you. You may feel neglected or unappreciated. The griever may not be able to be as emotionally present in your relationship during this time. This may be challenging. Do not take it personally. Be open to whatever emotions they are experiencing. Be patient. You may want to seek the support of others yourself while you are supporting someone else. Remember, grief belongs to the griever and it is important to follow their lead. Let them heal at their own pace and in their own manner. There is no "right" way to grieve. It is important that the griever feels free to express their feelings, even if they are irrational, without fear of judgment or criticism.

Offer practical ways you can help

Grief is exhausting. A bereaved person may appreciate help with mundane tasks like running errands, grocery shopping, preparing meals, transportation, mowing the lawn or shoveling snow, etc. Often people may say "let me know if I can do anything" to a grieving person. However, this places the burden on the griever to identify what they need which may be well beyond their capacity or they may feel reluctant to make a request. Offer ongoing assistance by suggesting specific tasks you can help with, even if the person turns you down. One example of offering support might be asking "I'm going to the grocery store later today, can I pick up anything for you?" to the griever. Be careful to avoid overreaching with tasks such as cleaning or laundry which may be perceived as judgment rather than assistance. If in doubt, ask. Most importantly, if you make a concrete offer of assistance be reliable and follow through.

Stay connected and available

There is no specific timeline for grief. Stay in touch. Offer to spend time with the bereaved person without them having to ask for it. This might include texting or calling them, offering to meet up for a coffee or a walk, watching a movie, etc. and keep asking them without expectation. Give them the ability to cancel at the last minute if they are not feeling up to attending. Often people reach out immediately after a death which can be a very busy and overwhelming time. People who are grieving need time and space to process their emotions. Let them know you will check in regularly (and only say this to them if you will follow through). Continue to include the person in your thoughts and plans over the long term. Consider setting a calendar reminder to check in on a grieving person in a few days, two weeks, a month, etc. Contacting them on holidays and significant dates such as the deceased person's birthday or on the anniversary of the day they died can reduce feelings of loneliness and let them know you care about their wellbeing. Follow their lead. If they seem uncomfortable with your efforts to touch base over time, consider reducing or stopping them. If they indicate they enjoy them, keep it up. People may decline or cancel invitations but still appreciate being asked.

Be Mindful of Your Language

Use the name of the deceased person when you are speaking. Follow the griever's lead. If they are in a delicate frame of mind or don't want to continue the conversation, leave it be. If they do want to talk and if you knew or met the deceased person, and it is an appropriate time, share your memories and the impressions these memories have left on you. You may consider sharing a positive story, keeping the focus on the person who died and not what you said or did. Keep it brief. If you did not know them, consider asking the bereaved person to tell you a story that illustrates how special this individual was to them.

Perhaps just as important as thinking about how to support someone who is grieving, there are some situations to avoid.

Behaviors to avoid with someone who is grieving:

Do not diminish their grief

People may unintentionally diminish someone's grief by making statements such as "You'll get over it soon", "Time heals all wounds", "Everything happens for a reason", "At least they are not in pain anymore", etc. Avoid any statement that tries to explain a person's death or give the impression that the deceased or their family is better off. The bereaved person might not feel the same way or might not find it comforting and they could resent being told what to think. Realize the griever's life has changed because of this loss. Be extra sensitive to someone who unexpectedly lost an immediate family member.

Do not make assumptions or comments based on external appearances

The grieving person may look fine on the outside and be struggling internally. Avoid statements like "You look great" or "You are so strong". These types of comments put pressure on the griever to keep up appearances and may lead to them hiding their emotions which can slow down the grief process.

Do not reference religion unless you are certain of their beliefs and, even then, be ultra-cautious

Comments such as "God never gives you more than you can handle", "It was God's plan", "Count your blessings", and "You'll see them again someday" can come across as judgmental and offensive to the griever, especially if they are not religious themselves. It is not uncommon for individuals who are religious to question their faith when they are grieving. Listening is more constructive.

Avoid giving unsolicited advice or solutions

As previously noted, grief cannot be fixed. Do not make uninvited suggestions about what the bereaved person should or shouldn't do. Although it may be well-intentioned, it may make the bereaved person feel even worse. It also implies judgment. If the bereaved person feels criticized, it may make them less likely to share their feelings with you. Do encourage the griever to look after themselves during this time.

Do not use the term “loved one” when referring to the person who died unless you are sure of their relationship

You don't always know the kind of relationship that existed with the person who died. Be aware that even if the griever had a troubled relationship with the person who died, there still may be a tremendous sense of loss.

Do not suggest it is time they “got over it” and “moved on”

Immediately after a death, the bereaved individual may find it unfathomable to imagine a future without the person who has died. As they continue to grieve, there will be times that may be particularly difficult for the bereaved person going forward. The length of the grieving process varies and often lasts much longer than people anticipate. We now know there are no set stages of grief. Be present and do your best to support them through the various milestones. Although the bereaved person may eventually adapt to a life without the deceased person, grief never fully goes away.

Grief is a normal and universal experience. With the compassionate support of others and their own means, many people can gradually learn to live with their loss and do not need to seek professional assistance. Sometimes the circumstances of the death or other factors might make grief complicated. If, over time, the griever seems particularly stuck or struggling to manage their daily life, you might gently suggest they seek help. Alternatively, you may consider accessing assistance for yourself in determining how to proceed.

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