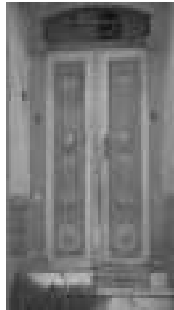


# Ways to Help a Grieving Friend or Relative



SHAKESPEARE WROTE, "WORDS CAN STING, BUT SILENCE BREAKS THE HEART."

RELATIVES, FRIENDS AND NEIGHBORS ARE OFTEN SUPPORTIVE AT THE TIME OF A DEATH AND DURING THE WAKE AND FUNERAL. SYMPATHY CARDS, FOOD, FLOWERS AND GUESTS ARRIVE TO EXPRESS CONDOLENCES AND SUPPORT THE BEREAVED. BUT AFTER THE FUNERAL, THE BEREAVED SOMETIMES WONDER WHERE THEIR FRIENDS HAVE GONE.

GRIEVING PEOPLE NEED SUPPORT AND CARING EVEN MORE WHEN THE REALITY BEGINS TO HIT AND THE LONG PROCESS OF GRIEF BEGINS. IMMEDIATE FAMILY MEMBERS MAY HAVE THEIR HANDS FULL WITH THEIR OWN GRIEF AND THEY MAY FIND IT DIFFICULT TO SUPPORT EACH OTHER.

A GRIEVING PERSON NEEDS PEOPLE WHO ARE WILLING TO LISTEN; CRY WITH THEM; SIT WITH THEM; REMINISCE; CARE; OFFER CREATIVE IDEAS FOR COPING; HELP THEM FEEL LOVED AND NEEDED; AND WHO BELIEVE THAT THEY WILL MAKE IT THROUGH.

YOUR HELP AND UNDERSTANDING CAN MAKE A SIGNIFICANT DIFFERENCE FOR SOMEONE WHO IS GRIEVING. YOU HAVE SOMETHING UNIQUE TO OFFER A GRIEVING FRIEND JUST BY SHOWING UP. BEING INVITED INTO THIS PROFOUND EXPERIENCE IS AN HONOR AND YOUR THOUGHTFULNESS DURING THIS TIME WILL NEVER BE FORGOTTEN.

## **Be There**

When you avoid the bereaved it adds to their loss. As the widowed often say, "I not only lost my spouse, but my friends as well." All that is necessary is a squeeze of the hand, a kiss, a hug, your presence.

Give your time; sit over a cup of tea, go for a walk or out to lunch, play tennis, go to a play or movie, attend a fitness class or take an adult school course together. Ask if there are certain times of day or night that are most difficult and see if they would like company then.

## **Listen**

The bereaved don't need your answers, just a good listener. Usually, when you ask "How are you?", you will get an "I'm okay" or something similar. They know that most people are only 'being polite' and that if they speak honestly, most become uncomfortable and may even change the subject. Continue with "How are you really" to let them know you are really there to listen.

Don't be scared to talk about the person who has died or mention his/her name; most bereaved people want to talk about the person they lost. Be aware that you may hear the same things many times as the person tries to find a way to cope with their loss. Listen attentively to the same story as many times as it needs to be told.

Sometimes the bereaved have few people to talk to about what happened during the illness or at the time of death for fear of upsetting them. Know yourself; if you think you can tolerate it, don't be afraid to ask about the process and how s/he handled it. Take your cues from the grieving person and be open to having that discussion. However, if the death was traumatic, such as an



accident or murder, it is more likely to be re-traumatizing to go over the details until a significant amount of time has passed.

## **Give a Gift**

Bring a meal, flowers, a plate of cookies, a plant, book or journal. Consider sending a card or note at the time of the deceased's birthday, death, a couple's anniversary, etc.

## **Give Practical Help**

Look for a need and fill it; run an errand, babysit, make a meal, help with holiday shopping, write thank you notes, wash the dishes in the sink, mow the lawn. Answering the phone or returning calls

can be particularly helpful if the death was sudden or unexpected. Be sensitive to individual needs; some people will be relieved if you just step in and help, others will take offense.

## **Make Your Offers of Help Specific**

It is really hard to ask for help, even if it's been offered. You can help by being specific. Instead of "Call me anytime" or "Let me know if I can do anything" Try "Let me take care of Chloe on Thursday afternoon", "I'm going to the store. What can I pick up for you?", "I'm planning to bring you dinner on Monday. Is that ok?"

## **Accept Feelings**

Learn how to allow the pain without trying to fix it. Allow expression of all feelings without judgment. It may be hard to take in some of what you hear, but do the best you can and remember that your presence is helpful.

Sometimes people are angry; at doctors, rescue teams, the person who died, other family members, God, the clergy, etc. Even if it makes you uncomfortable, try to just listen.

Often they feel guilty and say "If I only..." Listen with true concern. Instead of "Don't feel guilty" try "I think you did the best you could at the time."

Depression is often part of grief and can be scary. To be able to talk things over with an understanding friend may help a person avoid severe depression. Ask specifically about how they are feeling and coping.

After at least three months have passed since the death, many find taking part in a grief support group very helpful as they offer understanding, friendship, suggestions for coping and hope. Offer to attend a meeting with him/her.

## **Children and the Elderly**

These are often the forgotten grievers. Give them special attention. Don't tell them not to cry and don't shield them from the grieving of others.

### **Be Aware**

Lack of appetite, fatigue, sleep disturbances and dreams, headaches, concentration difficulties, forgetfulness, restlessness and impatience are common physical reactions to death. These affect the person's coping ability, energy and recovery.

Encourage counseling if grief continues to interfere with everyday functioning with no change.



There are no timelines for grieving. Be patient and stand by them. Grieving almost always takes longer than anyone would like. It's common for it to take two to five years to truly adjust to a significant loss and thrive again.

### **Things Not to Say**

Meaning to be helpful, many people say things they don't realize are very hurtful. If you don't know what to say, many times a simple "I'm so sorry" is the best thing to say.

**"I could never handle this as well as you."** This puts the grieving person on a pedestal and denies their internal experience.

**"You shouldn't feel like that."** This puts pressure on the bereaved to suppress their feelings instead of expressing them. Just listen, even when it's uncomfortable.

**"I know just how you feel."** Even if you have experienced a similar death, you do not know how that person feels. You are not the same person and you didn't lose the same person.

**"You just need a little time."** They will never stop missing the person who has died, though time can ease the pain.

**"She lived a long life" and "You were lucky to have her as long as you did."** Even if she lived to be 100, she will still be missed and the grieving are not feeling "lucky".

**"It was for the best."** If the dying person suffered with physical or psychological pain, the bereaved may eventually come to this conclu-

sion themselves, but it is not up to us to decide when they should be reconciled to this fact. In addition, while it might be better for the one who died, it is not always better for the one left behind.

**"It could be worse."** Imagining the possibility of additional tragedy does not lessen the pain they are experiencing.

**"God never gives you more than you can handle."** A loving God does not send tragedy to test faith.

**"It was God's will"** It is not comforting to believe that a loving God would take someone so important from them.

**"At least you have other children"** Other children can not replace the child who died.

**"You'll find someone else."** Even if it's likely, most people are not thinking this far into the future immediately after their partner dies. In addition, this comment implies that the person they loved can be easily replaced.

**"Be strong. Your husband/wife/child/parent needs you."** It's enough to handle eating, sleeping and walking. Do not further burden the grieving.

**"Don't take it so hard"** This sounds as though the loss is less significant. Instead try "I know this is tough to go through."

**"I don't want to make you cry"** Tears are a normal expression of grief. Helping someone cry, being there with a shoulder to cry on, is one of the most healing things one person can do for another.

**"You poor thing."** Pity is destructive; it undermines self-esteem and self-respect.

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## How to Help Grieving People



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