

HOW TO HELP GRIEVING PEOPLE

Grief reactions are a normal response to a loss, but they sure don't feel normal! Grief and mourning are hard work – among the hardest things we ever have to do. Following the death of a loved one (or any other major loss such as divorce, job loss, change in health status, fire or theft), we need caring people. While each one of us (and every relationship) is unique, we're more alike than we are different when we're bereft. We hurt – physically, spiritually, emotionally, socially, sometimes even financially. The pain is usually deeper and more long-lasting than we ever expected.

When the moment comes for us to reach out to grieving co-workers, family members or friends, it helps to know a few things about grief and remember to “handle with care”. (It's quite easy to say or do the wrong thing. We've all experienced clumsy or awkward moments!)

WHAT TO SAY:

- ◆ You don't have to know “the right thing to say”. The words: “I'm sorry” or “I care” and your kindness will be comforting enough.
- ◆ Your presence itself brings hope. Avoiding the sufferer can add to their sense of isolation and being “different”.
- ◆ Don't feel you have to have answers to the “Why?” question. This is most often a cry of pain rather than a true question.
- ◆ Inquire about what keeps them going, or if they have someone who is supporting them.
- ◆ Be careful about saying “I know just how you feel”. We never really can know, and this comment takes attention away from them.
- ◆ Don't worry if tears pop up – either yours or theirs. Tears represent love and pain and are helping us heal.
- ◆ Platitudes like “Life is for the living” or “It's God's will” rarely are consoling. These expressions might even be offensive or serve to stop a good conversation. (People need to reach these conclusions themselves.)

WHAT TO DO:

- ◆ Offer to help with practical tasks; then be sure to *follow through*. (Don't say “Call me”.)
- ◆ Send a “thinking-of-you” note on anniversaries, holidays, special days or any day.
- ◆ Demonstrate unconditional love.
- ◆ Help them avoid unrealistic expectations about how they “should” feel.

LISTEN (still the premier helping skill)

- ◆ Listen with compassion.
- ◆ Give opportunities to tell as much about the death as they wish. Frequently.
- ◆ Don't change the subject when they wish to talk.
- ◆ Don't avoid mentioning the dead person's name or the life-changing incident.
- ◆ Accept whatever feelings are expressed. Never judge, correct or minimize them. Don't press for recovery or “closure”. Let them set their own pace.

UNDERSTAND SOME THINGS ABOUT GRIEF

- ◆ Recognize that they may be angry. Be understanding and help them find healthy ways of handling the anger.

- ◆ If guilty feelings are shared, show interest. A good response might be: “I think that you did the best you could at the time, given everything you knew. But don’t push down your feelings of guilt. Talk about them until you can let them go.”
- ◆ Encourage discussion of depressed feelings, also. Talking can actually help prevent a person’s depression from becoming more serious. And grief is actually quite different than depression.
- ◆ Be aware that their self-esteem may be very low. Help them notice if they’re judging themselves too harshly.
- ◆ Be aware of how physical grief is (i.e. lack of appetite, sleeplessness, headaches, inability to concentrate.) Coping, energy and attention are definitely affected. Suggest a doctor visit if they’re worried about something.
- ◆ Feelings of “getting worse” are to be expected and may even represent progress as reality sinks in.
- ◆ Throw away your opinions about timelines for recovery. Be PATIENT. *Stand by them* for as long as necessary. Grief resolution almost always takes longer than everyone would like. (It’s not unreasonable for people to need two to five years to truly adjust to a major loss and thrive again.)
- ◆ Help them be patient with *themselves*, too. Notice and enjoy signs of their progress.

KEEP ADVICE TO A MINIMUM, BUT IF THE TIMING IS RIGHT AND YOU’RE ASKED:

- ◆ Suggest postponing major decisions.
- ◆ Keeping a journal or writing a letter might help.
- ◆ Recommend support group attendance. Accompany them, if possible.
- ◆ Encourage counseling if you think it would be helpful. Get other family members or your supervisor involved if you sense the person is in danger.
- ◆ Caution about the use of drugs (including alcohol).
- ◆ Suggest exercise. Better yet, offer to join them for a sport or a walk.

CHILDREN AND THE ELDERLY ARE OFTEN “FORGOTTEN GRIEVERS”.

- ◆ Give them special attention.
- ◆ DON’T tell them not to cry or ask questions.

As grief changes and reappears over time, continue your caring acts: notes, visits, plants, helpful books, cookies, phone calls, invitations are all so appreciated. Take the initiative!

Shakespeare wrote, “Words can sting, but silence breaks the heart”. It’s not okay to “do nothing”. Be yourself, be honest, but don’t disappear. You have something unique to offer a grieving friend by just showing up. Help the person feel loved and needed. Believe in them and believe them! (In hospice work, if a patient says they are in a great deal of pain, we don’t try to talk them out of that. We believe what they’re telling us and ask what would help. The same goes for bereaved family members we work with.)

Ways of helping are as limitless as your imagination. Being invited in to this profound experience is an honor. Your thoughtfulness will never be forgotten.

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