

Anthem

How to Help a Grieving Person

Often, people shy away from grieving people, not knowing how to help or what they can say. They are so afraid of saying the *wrong* thing that they end up avoiding the very person who needs care.

So what *can* you do to help someone you care about get through the grieving process? Here are some simple suggestions:

- **Be present.** One of the best things a friend can do for a griever is just be there. Simply sit with the person. Don't be afraid of long periods of silence. Your presence is often as important as anything that might be discussed.
- **Listen.** When a griever wishes to talk, you can provide a tremendous service by actively listening. Pay close attention to what the griever says, even if he or she repeats many of the stories. Repeating the story of how a loved one died is very common and can provide a great deal of relief for the griever. Listen with patience and without judgment.
- **Accept the griever's feelings.** Probably nothing helps a grieving person more than expressing feelings and releasing pent-up emotions. You can help by accepting whatever feelings – anger, guilt, sadness and fear – the griever is experiencing at the moment. Affirm those feelings by saying something like, “It’s OK to feel that way,” or “It must be a difficult time for you.”
- **Talk about the person who died.** Friends sometimes think that “bringing it up” will remind the griever of the loss and cause more pain. Most grievers say their loss is always top-of-mind. They’ll tell you that they can’t be in any more pain. They love to recall stories of their loved one, even if the memories stir up strong feelings. They will be grateful you cared enough to ask.
- **Offer to help in specific ways.** Instead of saying “If there is anything I can do to help, let me know,” offer to bring dinner over on a specific evening. Or suggest that you shop for groceries for a couple of

weeks. Many grievers are not in a position to make decisions, so offer specific help.

- **Be patient.** Grieving the death of a loved one may take a long time. Be patient with the griever, realizing there will be many ups and downs, many mood swings and many behavioral changes. Your listening presence, a weekly phone call and a periodic note over the course of many months, could make a huge difference.
- **Understand the need for a balanced response.** Be present without being overbearing. Keep in touch without being intrusive. Provide specific help without being pushy or overprotective. Take the advice of author Henri Nouwen: “The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, which can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not-knowing, not-curing, not-healing and face with us the reality of our powerlessness, that is the friend who cares.”



What to Say

“I’m sorry” is often the simplest and the best.

What Not to Say

Clichés and platitudes such as:

“I know just how you feel!”

“You’ll get over it in time.”

“She is better off this way.”

“Life is for the living.”



* Courtesy of The Grief Recovery Center
Richmond, VA

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