

Grief and Loss: How Can I Help? – A Guide for Family and Friends

People often feel awkward and ill prepared when approaching a grieving friend or loved one. This occurs for many reasons. We feel uncomfortable because as a culture we try to avoid death and the unpleasant feelings that go with it. We may want to make the person feels better. We feel we won't know what to do or what to say. But there are many things you can do to comfort the bereaved.

- Show your support. There is always a place for the usual activities. This may include making or sending food for the family or guests, sending a card with a personal note about the deceased if you knew him or her personally, or making a donation to a cause of special interest to the deceased and family.
- Be available. Let the bereaved person know you are available for whatever he or she might need, be it a late night phone call, a ride to the store, or a movie companion.
- Give practical help. Ask what needs to be done or look around to discover what might be needed. And if you have a particular expertise, offer to share it. If you have an extra bedroom, offer out-of-town relatives a place to stay. If you have a financial background, offer to help a widow or widower go through accumulated business papers. If your children are friends, offer extra carpooling.
- Keep your promise. If you offer to baby-sit, house-sit, or grocery shop, be there and do it. The bereaved person doesn't need to hear excuses about how other areas of your life interfere with helping out.
- Avoid clichés. Although well meaning, many people recite phrases they have heard but may sound hollow or untrue. Saying "it's for the best," "time heals all wounds," "I know how you feel," or "she lived a long life and it was her time" negate the person's strong feelings and may signal to him or her that you are not ready or able to hear the bereaved's true feelings.
- Be honest. If statements are made with compassion and honesty, they will be understood, appreciated and received in that manner. Saying "I wish I knew what to say," "I'm so sorry," "please let me know if there's anything I can do to help" are more genuine and indicate a willingness to be there.

- Avoid judgments and comparisons. Everyone is different and has his or her own grief experience. Listening to someone tell you how they are doing is more helpful than telling a story about how someone else handled a similar situation.
- Realize that it takes time. A grieving person has many emotions; feelings and needs will change over time, sometimes in unpredictable ways. Therefore you should continue to maintain contact. Although a grieving person may reject offers to visit or go out in the first month, he or she may be ready in six months and feel uncomfortable about asking.
- Remember the grief process has no limits. Usually there is a great deal of activity in the first weeks after a death. Once this subsides, there can be a tremendous void for the grieving person. You may be the most helpful at this time, when others have moved on but the person who is bereaved is confronting the reality of his/her loss on a daily basis.
- Pay attention to significant dates. Although life goes on, particular events, especially in the first year, will never be the same. It can be of enormous comfort to the bereaved if you remember this will be his/her “first Christmas without” the deceased person. Offering to help make it easier or special in a new way can be greatly appreciated. One young woman says she will never forget when her childhood friend called the first time her deceased mother’s birthday occurred, telling her she thought it might be a difficult day. They proceeded to reminisce about their childhood experiences with the mother.
- Suggest professional help. Signs that your friend may be having difficulty coping with the loss include depression, persistent anxiety, substance or alcohol abuse or deteriorating physical health. If you notice these signs, you can suggest professional help. This should be offered in the context of a general discussion of how he/she is managing life. It should be done in a way that shows you care about the person, rather than as a criticism about how he/she is coping with grief.

By Robin F. Goodman, PhD, ATR-BC
 Copyright 2000 Lifescape