

Helping Your Bereaved Friend

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You have a good friend who has just experienced the death of a loved one. Perhaps you know instinctively what to do, but maybe you do not. Perhaps you have never lost a person you love. Maybe you haven't even been to a funeral. This is not unusual. Many people do not have occasion to attend a funeral until late in adulthood. Maybe your friend is of a different culture and you are not sure what rituals or customs would be correct. Use the following as a guide in preparing for the day when a friend has lost a loved one.

Preparing Yourself

You can do some things now to prepare yourself for a future event:

- **Review a personal grief experience.** Think back to your childhood and to a time you experienced the death of a loved one or even a pet. Remember what it was like for you. Who died? How did you feel? What was helpful? And what was not helpful? The more you understand your personal experience with death and grief, the more comfortable you can be in reaching out to a friend.
- **Become familiar with the process of grief.** There are many books in libraries and bookstores that are written about grief and loss. Find one and read it to understand better what your friend may be experiencing.
- **Use the correct language.** If someone has died, say the word "died" instead of euphemisms, such as "passed."
- **Pace yourself.** Helping a bereaved friend is hard work, and your friend will need you for months to come. Think realistically about how much time you can give without denying your own family of important time together. In the beginning, your friend will need you more, with less assistance required as he or she becomes more independent.

When Death Occurs

There is so much to do after a death, but ordinary, practical help is needed first.

Practical Help

- **Make phone calls** and answer the telephone, keeping a record of messages. Make sure the house is presentable, and help to clean it, if necessary. Keep track of food

and other gifts for thank you notes, and note which bowls belong to whom for later return.

- **Help with the children.** Children have special needs and may be ignored during this time. Talk to them about what they are feeling and thinking.
- **Run errands.** There are usually dozens of errands that need to be done. Ask for a list or help prepare one. Perform the ones you can and delegate the others.
- **Pick up out-of-town friends and relatives.** Offer to make trips to the airport or bus station to pick up those who are arriving to attend the funeral. Help find convenient and affordable lodging, or make arrangements with neighbors or friends to offer spare bedrooms.
- **Encourage your friend to take time out to rest.** Grief is exhausting, but if your bereaved friend is running on adrenaline, he or she may not be aware of the body's need to take a break.
- **Help with funeral arrangements.** At the time of death, families are tempted to spend huge amounts of money for the funeral, but their decisions may not be well thought through. Offer to go with your friend to the funeral home, but have a discussion about price beforehand. Spending thousands of dollars is not necessary for a nice funeral. Help your friend make the funeral more personal by incorporating the deceased's personality into a service of celebration of that person's life. If there are children present, suggest a special funeral service that would be shorter and more informal than the adult service.

Emotional Help

- **Think about how much time you can give.** Before committing yourself, determine how much time you can give without creating problems in your own family. Visits over a longer period of time are more important than many visits during the first week, when other friends and relatives are still available. With the departure of these people, the bereaved may feel isolated. Now is the time for you to start your visits, which may vary in length.
- **Learn good communication skills.** It is easy to do all of the talking, especially if you are anxious. Try not to fill every pause with chatter unless you have something important to say. Communication isn't always with words; use your eyes, as well. How does your friend look? Is she restless? Has her posture changed?
- **Be a good listener.** Listening is the most important gift you can offer a grieving person. Every time your bereaved friend tells his or her story, the reality of what has happened will sink in. The loss must become real in order for your friend to

move through the process of grief. As a listener, encourage your friend to talk and express feelings.

- **Help your friend organize his or her day.** People tend to feel overwhelmed when a loved has died because there is so much to do. Help organize urgent tasks, and those that can wait until a later time. Develop and post a list that can be checked off when tasks are completed.
- **Help with thank-you notes.** With an outpouring of support from family, friends and co-workers, this task may seem monumental. Your friend will have certain people to whom he or she will want to write personal notes. However, there are many thank-you notes that can be signed on behalf of your friend. That intimidating pile of cards can decrease quickly with your help.
- **Watch the children and their emotional needs.** Grief is so encompassing that children may be forgotten or ignored. See to their needs.
- **Share memories.** Sharing memories is so healing. Bereaved people love to hear stories about their loved ones.
- **Watch for depression.** It is normal for bereaved people to experience some depression, and reminiscing usually helps break it up. However, if you feel concerned about the degree of depression your friend may be exhibiting, suggest seeking professional help.
- **Identify local resources.** Find further resources for your friend, such as support groups, books, or therapists who specialize in grief. You can locate resources by calling your local hospice or mental health center.
- **Take care of yourself.** Helping the bereaved is hard work. Don't forget to take care of yourself. Find someone you can talk to. Check with your family and remain aware of their needs. Take time for yourself to do something special, such as taking long walks, reading a book, watching a favorite TV program, enjoying a quiet bath or listening to some of your favorite music. Take care of yourself. Your friend will need you for a long time.

Avoid Vacuous Platitudes

People sometimes worry that they will say the wrong thing. The following are some things to avoid:

- **"I know how you feel."** One can never know how another may feel. You could, instead, ask your friend to tell you how he or she feels.

- **"It's part of God's plan."** This phrase can make people angry and they often respond with, "What plan? Nobody told me about any plan."
- **"Look at what you have to be thankful for."** They know they have things to be thankful for, but right now they are not important.
- **"Call if you need anything."** They aren't going to call. It is much better to offer something concrete, such as: "I have two free hours and I want to come over and vacuum your house or work on your lawn."
- **"He's in a better place now"** The bereaved may or may not believe this. Keep your beliefs to yourself unless asked.
- **"This is behind you now; it's time to get on with your life."** Sometimes the bereaved are resistant to getting on with because they feel this means "forgetting" their loved one. In addition, moving on is easier said than done. Grief has a mind of its own and works at its own pace.
- **Statements that begin with "You should" or "You will."** These statements are too directive. Instead you could begin your comments with: "Have you thought about. . ." or "You might. . ."
- **Making decisions for your friend.** You can help your friend make decisions by exploring the pros and cons of what or what not to do. If you make a decision and it ends up being a bad one, your friend may be very angry with you. Moreover, you may be reinforcing dependence on you.
- **Discouraging expressions of grief.** It is best to "encourage" your friend to express grief. If your friend begins to cry, do not change the subject, rather give a hug, make a pot of coffee or find the tissue.
- **Promoting your own values and beliefs.** Listen to your friend talk about his or her values and beliefs. It's okay to share yours as long as you are not trying to convince your friend that your way is better.
- **Encouraging independence.** The bereaved may tend to lean on you too much. It is better to gently encourage independence with your support and guidance.

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Close Window