

Helping / Supporting Someone Who Is Grieving

HELPING YOUR CHILD, FRIEND OR PARENT COPE WITH THE DEATH OF A LOVED ONE



Bereavement can be a lonely and frightening experience for many people. Once the funeral is over and the cards and flowers stop pouring in, they still need caring and support.

It is not uncommon for people to have difficulty openly expressing their feelings around grief and sadness. This may be particularly true when the public outlets for their pain and sorrow have ended. Where do people then turn for support? Family members may be too preoccupied with their own grief to reach out. This is a time when friends, co-workers and neighbors can be instrumental in the healing process. The bereaved should be able to rely on members of their social network for caring and assistance, both practical and emotional.

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Grieving is a normal healing process

Regardless of the type of loss, there is a natural process of grieving. Understanding the nature of grief and bereavement gives you the insight that will enable you to help someone else cope. The more you understand about the basics of the grieving process, the more you may be able to help them:

- It is normal and necessary to experience intense emotional sensations in order to heal properly?
- Feelings of guilt, embarrassment and anger are part of the restorative process.
- Each person grieves differently.
- There is no set timetable for bereavement.

The most important thing you can do is just be there for them. You might not know exactly what to say or what to do, but that's okay. Don't let your discomfort get in the way when you want to reach out to a person who is grieving. Now, more than ever, your support is needed. Be willing to push past the awkwardness and be honest and straightforward. Know that you don't have to solve their problem; simply provide a listening ear.

When people feel guilty

Sometimes grieving people may feel guilt about what they should or shouldn't have done. You can help by:

- Letting them know how much you care.
- Affirming that they have done their best, and assure them that you know they will continue to do so.
- Encouraging them to keep talking about their feelings.

Even when you feel uncomfortable, provide an atmosphere in which your bereaved friend or family member knows that they have permission to talk about the person who died. Talk candidly about that person by name. When it seems appropriate, ask sensitive questions – without being nosy – that invite them to openly express their feelings.

Helping and supporting a grieving friend or loved one

When in doubt, err on the side of silent, emotionally-connected support. If you can't think of something to say, just offer eye contact or a squeeze of their hand. Your support can be conveyed simply, with your silent presence. Know that you don't have to have all the answers – or any of the answers, for that matter. You can reassure the bereaved person by letting them know that you will be there as a companion when needed during this sorrowful time, even though you can't take away their pain. Have confidence that they will again find meaning and joy in life.

Do's and don'ts for providing support and comfort to an adult

What to Do

- Behave naturally
- Show genuine concern
- Offer love patiently and unconditionally
- Offer hugs or an arm around the shoulder, as appropriate
- Sit next to the person who wants closeness
- Make it clear that you are there to listen
- Express your care and concern
- Say that you are sorry about the loss
- Say "I love you" if you feel close enough
- Talk openly and directly about the person who died
- Cry if you feel like crying
- Keep in mind that evenings, weekends, anniversaries and holidays can be extra challenging times.

What NOT to Do

- Don't try to avoid the bereaved person
- Don't pry into personal matters
- Don't ask questions about the circumstances of the death; but do be open to hearing whatever the bereaved wants to say about it.
- Don't offer advice or quick solutions:
 - "I know how you feel."
 - "You should _____."
 - "Time heals all wounds."
- Don't try to cheer up the person or distract them from the emotional intensity:
 - "At least he's no longer in pain."
 - "She's in a better place now."
 - "It was God's timing/will."
- Don't minimize the loss:
 - "Oh, it's not that bad."
 - "You'll be okay."
 - "Things will go back to normal before you know it."
- Don't lead the bereaved to the false assumption that self-medicating with alcohol or drugs will provide a solution. This is only a temporary fix for their emotional pain and actually makes it worse in the long term.

Additional ways to provide comfort and support

Because grief can be a confusing and overwhelming experience, it is difficult for many people to ask for help. They might feel guilty about receiving so much attention or not want to be a burden on others. If that appears to be the situation, you can make it easier for them by making specific suggestions – such as, "I'm going to the market this afternoon. What can I bring you from there?" or "I've made beef stew for dinner. When can I come by and bring you some?" Or you can convey an open invitation by saying, "Let me know what I can do," which may make a grieving person feel more comfortable about getting back to you.

Be the one who takes the initiative to:

- Pick up the phone to just check in
- Offer to run errands or get groceries
- Drop off a casserole or other type of food
- Watch their children to provide them with some down time
- Tag along at a bereavement support group meeting
- Go for a brisk walk or shoot hoops together
- Share an enjoyable activity (game, puzzle, art project)
- Encourage going out and socializing once the person feels ready

When a loved one dies, the surviving friends and family members live with constant reminders of their loss. So take the opportunity to invite them to your home or out to eat. A card or short note is also a thoughtful way to show your concern. Consistency is very helpful, if you can manage it – being there for as long as it takes. This helps the grieving person look forward to your attentiveness without having to make the additional effort of asking again and again. Be aware that certain memorable dates may be more difficult for them emotionally. They may miss that person even more on special occasions. From seemingly nowhere, profound tears may well up. All of this is completely normal.

Helping a grieving child

As with an adult, the best gift you can offer a grieving child is your loving care. Here are some things to consider that will affect a grieving child.

- The response of their parents, their surviving parent or caretaker
- A truthful explanation of what has happened
- How the loss is viewed by others
- Continuity in their daily life

- Feeling that support is accessible and available

In addition, grieving children are helped when you get in touch with your own feelings and with how you are making sense of the loss. This is a window of opportunity for you, the adult, to work through any unfinished grieving from your own childhood.

Answer any questions a child may have as a way to model open communication. Open communication will smooth the way for a child to ask difficult questions and express distressing feelings. This enables a child to freely express their grief to a person they trust at a time of their own choosing in a manner that they find appropriate.

Use very simple, honest and concrete terms as you gently explain to a child. Children, especially young children, may blame themselves for what happened and the truth helps them see they are not at fault.

How does age affect the way a child reacts to the loss of a loved one?

Children can be very sensitive to death, especially if they do not comprehend what has happened. Although every child is individual, children of various ages usually react differently to the death of a loved one, based on their developmental level.

- **Children under five years** of age may not understand that the death is final. Prone to magical thinking and an egocentric view of the world, they may feel responsible for the death, "because I was naughty." Warning signs that young children are having difficulty adjusting include soiling, bedwetting, sleeplessness, clinginess, or minor illnesses.
- **Children between five and ten years** of age are able to understand that death is irreversible, resulting in permanent separation. Still, they may have a strong desire to maintain a connection with the deceased, especially if that person was a parent. They often think about the deceased daily and feel that person is watching them; they may talk with the absent person or dream about them. Keeping physical objects associated with that person may be important to them. Warning signs that they are having difficulty adjusting include poor concentration and schoolwork, repetitive play, and behavioral problems.
- **Children ages ten to adolescence** have a growing understanding of abstract concepts, such as that death is universal, inevitable, and that it can affect them personally. Their desire to become more autonomous is conflicted by a desire for closeness, as exhibited by indifference and detachment, as well as identifying with the deceased person. Warning signs that they are having difficulty adjusting include depression, poor concentration and lack of interest in school.

Factors that help a child cope with traumatic loss

Children, because of their vulnerability can be extra sensitive to death. They are more at risk for becoming traumatized – especially if the death is sudden and unexpected. There is some evidence to suggest that children who suffer a traumatic loss early in childhood may be more likely to experience psychiatric disorder later in life. Adults who lost a parent early in life may be more prone than the general population to be vulnerable to depression and anxiety, especially when faced with further loss. How we as adults help a child cope with their loss can prevent the loss from disabling a child emotionally.

Because children often express themselves through stories, games and artwork, encourage this self-expression, and look for clues in those activities about how they are coping. Here are some other suggestions:

Do's and don'ts for providing support and comfort to a child

What to Do

- Allow a child, however young, to attend the funeral if they want to do so
- Convey your spiritual values about life and death
- Meet regularly as a family to find out how everyone is coping
- Pray with your child (if that is part of your belief system)
- Help children find ways to symbolize and memorialize the deceased person
- Pay attention to the way a child plays; this can be one of a child's primary ways of communicating
- Keep their daily routine as normal as possible

What NOT to Do

- Don't try to shelter children from the reality of death; it can be a learning experience
- Don't give false or confusing messages, like "Grandma is sleeping now"
- Don't tell a child to stop crying because others might get upset
- Don't force a child to publicly mourn if he or she doesn't want to
- Don't hesitate to cry in the presence of a child; by expressing genuine emotions you are demonstrating that it is acceptable for the child's feelings to be expressed, too
- Don't turn your child into your personal confidante; rely on another adult or a support group instead

If you are concerned that your child is having difficult adjusting, despite your best efforts to assist them, you may want to consider seeking professional advice.

Warning signs for depression

As a trusted friend or family member, you have the opportunity to monitor the bereaved person. This can be tricky, because you don't want to be perceived as invasive or giving unwanted advice. Instead of telling the person what to do, try stating your own feelings: "I am troubled by the fact that you aren't sleeping – perhaps you should look into getting help."

The following warning signs need to be taken seriously. Encourage or seek professional help if you observe or suspect the following after the initial grieving period:

- Poor personal hygiene
- Disturbed sleep patterns
- Drastic weight gain or loss
- No interest in previously enjoyable activities
- Alcohol or drug abuse
- Persistent suicidal thoughts
- Pain or constriction in the chest

Talking about Suicide

If the person talks about not wanting to continue living do your best to listen get help.

See Understanding and Helping the Suicidal Person

Related Helpguide article

Coping with Grief and Loss - ways to make your grieving more complete and more positive.

Related links for Coping with grief and loss

Helping a grieving Parent

Helping a Grieving Parent - (American Hospice Foundation)

Helping a grieving friend

Helping Your Bereaved Friend - Describes the ways you can offer practical and emotional help. Includes a list of clichés to avoid. (American Hospice Foundation)

Writing a Condolence Note - Outlines practical tips on how to write a sensitive and helpful condolence note to someone in grief. (American Hospice Foundation)

Death at the Worksite: Helping Grieving Family Members(American Hospice Foundation)

Helping a Grieving Child

How to Help Your Child Deal With Death - Provides clear and simple suggestions for helping children understand and cope with the death of a loved one. (Nemours Foundation)

Guidelines for Parents to Help Their Children Through Grief(American Hospice Foundation)

The Grieving Teen (American Hospice Foundation)

Loss, Grief, and Bereavement - A comprehensive article with hyperlinked subsections including Phases of Grief and many other grieving topics. Describes how children grieve at different phases of their development. (National Cancer Institute)

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