

Ways to Help a Grieving Friend

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Grief can be a difficult and stressful experience, and supporting a grieving friend can be challenging. Feeling awkward and unsure are normal feelings when faced with someone who has had a difficult loss. It is important to reach past your own discomfort because your support is vital as your friend learns to live with loss and find a way towards the future. Here are some ideas that will help you as you help others.

Learn about the experience of grief. Grief is as individual as each person is, but there are common elements that are helpful to remember. In the beginning, shock, numbness and disbelief are to be expected. Periods of depression and longing to be with the deceased are part of the grieving process. Intense feelings such as sadness, anger, guilt, regret and loneliness can be difficult to witness and overwhelming to experience. Usually the intensity of these feelings and experiences will change over time with the love and support of others, as a person learns to live with loss.

Things to remember:

There is more than one way to journey through grief, and not one correct way. Many paths exist, and each person will find his or her own. Some people need to talk, others need to be silent. Some people need to do things, others need to be still. Let the griever lead you.

Be patient. Grief takes time. How much time depends on many things, but it is usually more time than most people expect. The bereaved often get messages that “they should be over it by now” and should be “moving on.” They may even hear this just a couple of weeks after a death. Let them know that the entire year after a death can be challenging as there are many firsts to be experienced. First birthdays, anniversaries and holidays without a loved one can be very difficult. Your presence and support will be especially appreciated during these times.

Avoid platitudes, such as “This is part of God’s plan” and “She is in a better place.” These can be very hard words to hear and can cause pain and anger. Let the griever tell you about his or her beliefs regarding the death. Struggling with doubts and faith are a normal experience for many. Anger needs to be expressed and worked through.

Listen. Your experiences may be similar, but no two journeys of grief are exactly the same because our relationships are unique and special. If asked, be willing to share your own experience with grief, but remember that what grievers need most of all is to be heard. Let them tell their story and listen, really listen to what they need to say. Be willing to sit in silence. Sometimes your quiet presence and reassuring hug may be all that is needed.

Share stories and memories of the deceased.

Be willing to say the person’s name. Talk about what you will always remember and hold in your heart. The bereaved need to know that their loved ones’ lives had meaning and that their presence in your life will not be forgotten.

Pay special attention to children and teenagers.

They are deeply affected by loss and may not know how to express their feelings. Younger children do not have a clear understanding about the permanence of death. Often children show their grief through their behaviors, not through talking. They do not grieve in the same manner as adults. Children will re-experience the loss at later developmental stages as their understanding of death deepens and milestones are reached. Teens need the support of peers as they struggle with complicated feelings. All children need to know that they have the support of caring adults as they learn to live with loss.

Call and offer concrete support. Expecting grieving people to reach out is generally unrealistic. They may be too confused and

preoccupied to ask for help. Calling and offering specific ideas can be a great gift. You can do the grocery shopping, make meals, drive the kids to sports or play practice, offer to babysit, etc. Take the initiative, but let the bereaved tell you what will be most helpful. They may already have more lasagna in the freezer than they can possibly eat, but help with the lawn or with laundry might be most appreciated. Show up and ask “How can I help today?”

Be there for the long haul. Know that your love and support are needed at the time of death, but also in six months, two years and beyond. People do not “get over” the death of loved ones, but can and do learn to live with loss and to carry their grief more easily. Your love and caring will be needed all along the way.

Take care of yourself. You may also be grieving. Know your limits and enlist the support of others.

Sometimes grief can become complicated. Ups and downs are to be expected but generally, powerful feelings and emotions tend to lessen over the first year. Special days and the anniversary of the death may bring a resurgence of these feelings, but overall, the bereaved may experience some lifting of the heavy burden of grief. If you are concerned that the griever’s experiences are intensifying, talking with a Montgomery Hospice Bereavement Counselor can be helpful. We can offer suggestions for other support such as reading materials, counseling resources, groups and workshops. Montgomery Hospice Bereavement Counselors are available to help you support loved ones on the path of grief.

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