GRIEF & LOSS

Helping Someone Who's Grieving

Is someone you know grieving a loss? Learn what to say and how to comfort someone through bereavement, grief, and loss.

By Melinda Smith, M.A., Lawrence Robinson and Jeanne Segal, Ph.D.
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How to support someone who's grieving

When someone you care about is grieving after a loss, it can be difficult to know what to say or do. The bereaved struggle with many intense and painful emotions, including depression, anger, guilt, and profound sadness. Often, they also feel isolated and alone in their grief, since the intense pain and difficult emotions can make people uncomfortable about offering support.

You may be afraid of intruding, saying the wrong thing, or making your loved one feel even worse at such a difficult time. Or maybe you think there's little you can do to make things better. That's understandable. But don't let discomfort prevent you from reaching out to someone who is grieving. Now, more than ever, your loved one needs your support. You don't need to have answers or give advice or say and do all the right things. The most important thing you can do for a grieving person is to simply be there. It's your support and caring presence that will help your loved one cope with the pain and gradually begin to heal.

The keys to helping a loved one who's grieving

- Don't let fears about saying or doing the wrong thing stop you from reaching out.
- Let your grieving loved one know that you're there to listen.
- Understand that everyone grieves differently and for different lengths of time.
- Offer to help in practical ways.
- Maintain your support after the funeral.

Helping a grieving person tip 1: Understand the grieving process

The better your understanding of grief and how it is healed, the better equipped you'll be to help a bereaved friend or family member:

There is no right or wrong way to grieve. Grief does not always unfold in orderly, predictable stages. It can be an emotional rollercoaster, with unpredictable highs, lows, and setbacks. Everyone grieves differently, so avoid telling your loved one what they "should" be feeling or doing.

Grief may involve extreme emotions and behaviors. Feelings of guilt, anger, despair, and fear are common. A grieving person may yell to the heavens, obsess about the death, lash out at loved ones, or cry for hours on end. Your loved one needs reassurance that what they feel is normal. Don't judge them or take their grief reactions personally.

There is no set timetable for grieving. For many people, recovery after bereavement takes 18 to 24 months, but for others, the grieving process may be longer or shorter. Don't pressure your loved one to move on or make them feel like they've been grieving too long. This can actually slow the healing process.

Tip 2: Know what to say to someone who's grieving

While many of us worry about what to say to a grieving person, it's actually more important to listen. Oftentimes, well-meaning people avoid talking about the death or change the subject when the deceased person is mentioned. Or, knowing there's nothing they can say to make it better, they try to avoid the grieving person altogether.

But the bereaved need to feel that their loss is acknowledged, it's not too terrible to talk about, and their loved one won't be forgotten. One day they may want to cry on your shoulder, on another day they may want to vent, or sit in silence, or share memories. By being present and listening compassionately, you can take your cues from the grieving person. Simply being there and listening to them can be a huge source of comfort and healing.

How to talk—and listen—to someone who's grieving

While you should never try to force someone to open up, it's important to let your grieving friend or loved one know that you're there to listen if they want to talk about their loss. Talk candidly about the person who died and don't steer away from the subject if the deceased's name comes up. And when it seems appropriate, ask sensitive questions—without being nosy—that invite the grieving person to openly express their feelings. By simply asking, "Do you feel like talking?" you're letting your loved one know that you're available to listen.

You can also:

Acknowledge the situation. For example, you could say something as simple as: "I heard that your father died." By using the word "died" you'll show that you're more open to talk about how the grieving person really feels.

Express your concern. For example: "I'm sorry to hear that this happened to you."

Let the bereaved talk about how their loved one died. People who are grieving may need to tell the story over and over again, sometimes in minute detail. Be patient. Repeating the story is a way of processing and accepting the death. With each retelling, the pain lessens. By listening patiently and compassionately, you're helping your

loved one heal.

[Read: Bereavement: Grieving the Loss of a Loved One]

Ask how your loved one feels. The emotions of grief can change rapidly so don't assume you know how the bereaved person feels at any given time. If you've gone through a similar loss, share your own experience if you think it would help. Remember, though, that grief is an intensely individual experience. No two people experience it exactly the same way, so don't claim to "know" what the person is feeling or compare your grief to theirs. Again, put the emphasis on listening instead, and ask your loved one to tell you how they're feeling.

Accept your loved one's feelings. Let the grieving person know that it's okay to cry in front of you, to get angry, or to break down. Don't try to reason with them over how they should or shouldn't feel. Grief is a highly emotional experience, so the bereaved need to feel free to express their feelings—no matter how irrational—without fear of judgment, argument, or criticism.

Be genuine in your communication. Don't try to minimize their loss, provide simplistic solutions, or offer unsolicited advice. It's far better to just listen to your loved one or simply admit: "I'm not sure what to say, but I want you to know I care."

Be willing to sit in silence. Don't press if the grieving person doesn't feel like talking. Often, comfort for them comes from simply being in your company. If you can't think of something to say, just offer eye contact, a squeeze of the hand, or a reassuring hug.

Offer your support. Ask what you can do for the grieving person. Offer to help with a specific task, such as helping with funeral arrangements, or just be there to hang out with or as a shoulder to cry on.

Things to avoid saying to someone who's grieving

"It's part of God's plan." This platitude can anger people. Often, they'll 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.

"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. Besides, moving on is much 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 try..."

Source: American Hospice Foundation

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Tip 3: Offer practical assistance

It is difficult for many grieving people to ask for help. They might feel guilty about receiving so much attention, fear being a burden to others, or simply be too depressed to reach out. A grieving person may not have the energy or motivation to call you when they need something, so instead of saying, “Let me know if there's anything I can do,” make it easier for them by making specific suggestions. You could say, “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?”

If you're able, try to be consistent in your offers of assistance. The grieving person will know that you'll be there for as long as it takes and can look forward to your attentiveness without having to make the additional effort of asking again and again.

There are many practical ways you can help a grieving person. You can offer to:

- Shop for groceries or run errands.
- Drop off a casserole or other type of food.
- Help with funeral arrangements.
- Stay in your loved one's home to take phone calls and receive guests.
- Help with insurance forms or bills.
- Take care of housework, such as cleaning or laundry.
- Watch their children or pick them up from school.
- Drive your loved one wherever they need to go.
- Look after your loved one's pets.
- Go with them to a support group meeting.
- Accompany them on a walk.
- Take them to lunch or a movie.
- Share an enjoyable activity (sport, game, puzzle, art project).

Tip 4: Provide ongoing support

Your loved one will continue grieving long after the funeral is over and the cards and flowers have stopped. The length of the grieving process varies from person to person, but often lasts much longer than most people expect. Your bereaved friend or family member may need your support for months or even years.

Continue your support over the long haul. Stay in touch with the grieving person, periodically checking in, dropping by, or sending letters or cards. Once the funeral is over and the other mourners are gone, and the initial shock of the loss has worn off, your support is more valuable than ever.

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Don't make assumptions based on outward appearances. The bereaved person may look fine on the outside, while inside they're suffering. Avoid saying things like "You are so strong" or "You look so well." This puts pressure on the person to keep up appearances and to hide their true feelings.

The pain of bereavement may never fully heal. Be sensitive to the fact that life may never feel the same. You don't "get over" the death of a loved one. The bereaved person may learn to accept the loss. The pain may lessen in intensity over time, but the sadness may never completely go away.

Offer extra support on special days. Certain times and days of the year will be particularly hard for your grieving friend or family member. Holidays, family milestones, birthdays, and anniversaries often reawaken grief. Be sensitive on these occasions. Let the bereaved person know that you're there for whatever they need.

Tip 5: Watch for warning signs of depression

It's common for a grieving person to feel depressed, confused, disconnected from others, or like they're going crazy. But if the bereaved person's symptoms don't gradually start to fade—or they get worse with time—this may be a sign that normal grief has evolved into a more serious problem, such as clinical depression.

Encourage the grieving person to seek professional help if you observe any of the following warning signs after the initial grieving period—especially if it's been over two months since the death.

- Difficulty functioning in daily life.
- Extreme focus on the death.
- Excessive bitterness, anger, or guilt.
- Neglecting personal hygiene.
- Alcohol or drug abuse.

- Inability to enjoy life.
- Hallucinations.
- Withdrawing from others.
- Constant feelings of hopelessness.
- Talking about dying or suicide.

It can be tricky to bring up your concerns to the bereaved person as you don't want to be perceived as invasive. 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."

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Take talk of suicide very seriously

If a grieving friend or family member talks about suicide, seek help immediately. Please read Suicide Prevention or call a suicide helpline:

- In the U.S., call 1-800-273-8255.
- In the UK, call 116 123.
- Or visit IASP for a helpline in your country.

How to comfort a child who's grieving

Even very young children feel the pain of bereavement, but they learn how to express their grief by watching the adults around them. After a loss—particularly of a sibling or parent—children need support, stability, and honesty. They may also need extra reassurance that they will be cared for and kept safe. As an adult, you can support children through the grieving process by demonstrating that it's okay to be sad and helping them make sense of the loss.

Answer any questions the child may have as truthfully as you can. Use very simple, honest, and concrete terms when explaining death to a child. Children—especially young children—may blame themselves for what happened and the truth helps them see they are not at fault.

Open communication will smooth the way for a child to express distressing feelings. 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.

Helping a grieving child

Do:

- Allow your child, however young, to attend the funeral if they want to.
- Convey your spiritual values about life and death or pray with your child.
- Meet regularly as a family to find out how everyone is coping.
- Help your child find ways to symbolize and memorialize the deceased person.
- Keep your child's daily routine as normal as possible.
- Pay attention to the way your child plays; this can be how they communicate grief.

Don't:

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- Force a child to publicly mourn if they don't want to.
- Give false or confusing messages, like “Grandma is sleeping now.”
- Tell a child to stop crying because others might get upset.
- Try to shield a child from the loss. Children pick up on much more than adults realize. Including them in the grieving process will help them adapt and heal.
- Stifle your tears. By crying in front of your child, you send the message that it's okay for them to express feelings, too.
- Turn your child into your personal confidante. Rely on another adult or a support group instead.

Find a bereavement helpline

In the U.S.	Crisis Call Center at 775-784-8090
UK	Cruse Bereavement Care at 0808 808 1677
Australia	GriefLine at (03) 9935 7400

Find other support

Find a GriefShare group meeting near you – Worldwide directory of support groups for people grieving the death of a family member or friend. (GriefShare)

Find Support – Directory of programs and support groups in the U.S. for children experiencing grief and loss. (National Alliance for Grieving Children)

Chapter Locator for finding help for grieving the loss of a child in the U.S. and International Support for finding help in other countries. (The Compassionate Friends)

More Information

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Helpful links

01. Grief: How to Support the Bereaved - How to help in the first few days, how to listen with compassion. (Better Health Channel)

02. How to Help a Grieving Person - Series of articles on bereavement support, including how to help parents, families, friends, and co-workers. (Journey of Hearts)

03. Helping a Grieving Parent - Offers advice on how to comfort your surviving parent, while also dealing with your own grief. (American Hospice Foundation)

04. When an Employee is Grieving the Death of a Child - How employers can help a grieving employee. (The Compassionate Friends)

05. Helping Your Child Deal With Death - Suggestions for helping children cope with the death of a loved one. (KidsHealth)

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