

How to Help Someone Who is Grieving



'When no one else could even meet my eyes one friend said, 'I was so sorry to hear about Matthew.' It meant so much to me then. And now over 30 years on, her courage and kindness still bring me comfort.' (Wendy)

There is no doubt that having the love and support of family and friends is one of the most important ways that grieving people manage personal crises and tragedies. There are many ways you can be supportive and helpful to people you know who are grieving. Your care and support is very important, probably more important than you realise. No-one can take away the pain and sadness, but knowing that people care is comforting and healing.

Some things to know about grieving people

Grief is a personal experience; however, we can provide significant support and comfort to people during this time. Everyone grieves in their own way, and so long as there is no risk or harm to them or anyone else, there is no 'right' or 'wrong' way to grieve. It is important to remember that grief is a process, not an event. Profound grief is not something that we just 'get over', but rather is something that we gradually learn to live around as we continue to lead our lives.

Grief can make people very sensitive and they may react or respond in unexpected ways. Grief can be likened to having an open wound, and it can be easy for others to inadvertently 'touch a nerve' or say or do the wrong thing. There is no formula for what is right or wrong. What one person finds helpful, another person may not.

The most important thing is to make sure your friend or relative knows that you care. Find a way to show them this, perhaps by visiting, calling or texting them, giving food, bringing flowers, or sending cards and letters.

Death can be a difficult subject and it can be hard to know what to do or say to someone who is grieving, but don't allow this to keep you away, as silence and distance can be very hurtful. If you feel you have made a mistake and perhaps said the wrong thing, it is never too late to say you are sorry. Don't allow your relationship with your grieving friend or relative to be damaged.

Be patient

People who are grieving will not necessarily know themselves what will be the most helpful. This may be a new experience for them too. Try to offer support in different ways and at different times. If you are unsure, ask. For example you could ask: 'Would you like me to do some shopping for you?' or 'Would you like me to go to the cemetery with you?' Grief doesn't have a timeline, so keep in mind that it may take some time, even years, for them to adjust to life without their loved one.

Keep in touch

Make sure your friend or relative knows you have not forgotten about the person they have lost, or about them. Be prepared to reach out to them and be supportive on an ongoing basis. Even something as simple as a 'how are you' text message can make a difference.

Be prepared to spend time listening

One of the greatest gifts you can give someone who is grieving is time and the ability to listen. Be prepared to listen if the person who is grieving wants to talk – even over and over about the same things.

Share memories and stories

Most people are glad to hear of ways that their loved one was remembered and valued by other people, and to have the opportunity to talk about them.

Don't be afraid to use the name of the person who has died

As time goes on, the bereaved person will probably be glad to know that their loved one is still remembered and to have the opportunity to hear and say their name.

Encourage them to accept help and support

Encourage the person who is grieving to seek help from other sources too. Support groups, the internet, books, brochures, counselling or other professional help may be useful for them. Other comforting things might include distractions, meditation, relaxation and massage.

Take care of yourself

Listening and sharing someone else's pain can be personally demanding and exhausting. Make sure you have good supports yourself and that you are not inhibiting your own capacity to grieve, whether it be for the person who has died, or for your own experiences of loss that may come back to the surface. You need to be fair to yourself, as well as the person who needs support, so be careful not to overcommit yourself.

How you can help someone who is grieving

You cannot 'fix' things for them, but there are a range of ways you can help, including:

- offering to come over and just be there for them
- listening and accepting strong emotions
- showing that you care; a hug might be helpful, but check it out with them first
- offering practical support, e.g. cooking, mowing the lawn, taking the kids to school
- using their loved one's name
- sharing your memories and stories of their loved one with them
- acknowledging birthdays, anniversaries, milestones and other significant occasions
- asking how they are, both initially and on an ongoing basis
- not saying 'I know' or 'I understand' unless you really do
- avoiding platitudes – 'It's God's will', 'They had a good innings', etc.
- not taking their responses personally – grief is an emotional rollercoaster and the reactions of the bereaved are not a personal attack on you
- not avoiding them – while there are no words that can heal their pain, the absence of family and friends can make the pain much worse
- encouraging them to make their own decisions
- helping them find information and further help if needed.

When to seek further help

Although grief can be very painful, most people (85–90%) find that with the support of their family and friends and their own resources, they gradually find ways to learn to live with their loss, and do not need to seek professional help.

However, sometimes the circumstances of the death may have been particularly distressing, such as a traumatic or sudden death, or there may be circumstances which make the grief particularly acute or complicated. You could consider suggesting that your friend or relative seeks professional help if, over time, they seem to be finding it difficult to manage their day-to-day life.