

# How to Help a Griever

## Listen

This is one of my favorite sayings:

### **LISTEN!**

If you are having a conversation,  
and you hear  
two voices,  
stop yours!

When someone we know experiences the death of a loved one, we want to help. We want to **do** something to make it better, or easier, for the griever. Don't try to make it better... let go of the outcome. Each griever must find his own way.

We often underestimate the power of our physical presence and patient listening, but grievers often say that that is what they most appreciate. Remember, you can't take someone else's pain away, but you can let them know by your presence, your caring responses, and your hugs, that they are not alone.

Don't be afraid of silences or feel you need to fill them with well-meaning words.

At the beginning of the grief process, a griever may tell the story of the death over and over again. She is trying to come to terms with the reality of what happened. Listen patiently.

Be patient with tears and pain. Don't hand the griever a tissue—that sends the message “Stop crying.”

Say the name of the person who died frequently. It's comforting to grievers and makes them feel their loved one is not forgotten.

## Honor the Uniqueness of Grief

No 2 people experience the exact same grief process, just as no 2 people experience the exact same relationship. Things that were helpful for you may not be helpful for someone else. Offer specific, constructive suggestions, but never criticize the way someone else is dealing with their grief, think they're wrong because they don't do it the way you did, or tell them what they “should” do.

There is no time limit to the grief process, so give the griever whatever time she needs and let her proceed at her own pace. Don't urge the griever to give away the clothing and possessions of her loved one. She will do it when she's ready.

Be available for companionship and socializing, but allow the griever to say “no” when he feels

the need to be alone.

Be aware that men and women often grieve differently. While women find it more helpful to express their grief in words and tears, men usually need something to do—a project or activity. This is a generalization, of course, but it is often true and the source of much misunderstanding between family members who are grieving.

### **Offer Practical Help**

We sometimes forget that someone who is grieving has little energy to focus on the everyday chores of physical life. Offer to make a meal, do laundry, answer the phone, provide transportation, mow the lawn, put gas in the car, pick the kids up from school, etc. And remember that this type of support is especially helpful throughout the first year of the grief process, not just in the first few days or weeks.

Don't say "Call me if you need anything." Grievers don't remember who said that, and don't have the energy to choose someone to do a particular task. Just do it.

### **Be at the Funeral**

Grievers often remember who was there to offer love and comfort. If you knew the deceased and the format of the service permits, say a few words of remembrance. Stay after the funeral and be available.

### **Write a Condolence Letter**

Your own caring words are much more important to a griever than the trite words of a greeting card. Grievers often keep cards and letters they've received and read them over and over again, so make yours meaningful. Talk about the person who died and share a memory you had with her or him. Use his or her name frequently.

Mention one of your own losses, and tell a story about how you dealt with it.

Be aware of the relationship, and be sensitive to ambiguous feelings on the part of the griever about the deceased.

### **Make a Note of Anniversaries**

Holidays and anniversaries of the death can be times of intense grief. Be aware of when they are and call or send a card to the griever. Help the griever create new traditions, or a memorial service, ceremony, or place.

### **Talk About Your Losses**

Grievers find it comforting to hear other people's stories. It makes them feel less alone, and they

often learn something from the way others have dealt with their losses. As long as you don't act the role of the "expert" and prescribe, sharing your experiences is an important service you can provide. Just remember not to dominate the conversation.

## What to Say

What people say to grievors that is **not** helpful:

- "You're doing so well."
- "You should get out more (or less, or whatever)."
- "Call me if you need anything."
- "Time heals all wounds."
- "Why don't you talk to \_\_\_\_\_ (someone else) about it."
- "I know exactly how you feel."
- "You'll get over it."
- "God never gives us more than we can handle."
- "S/He is in a better place."
- "Think of all you have to be thankful for."
- "Just be happy that s/he's not in pain anymore."
- "You're lucky that you can have another child."

What to say that **is** helpful:

- "How are you feeling?"
- "I've been thinking about you. How is it going?"
- "When my parent/spouse/child/friend died..."
- "Tell me about it."
- "Tell me more." or "What else."
- "How did that feel?"
- "What do you think about that?"
- "That's normal."
- "That must have hurt."
- "I don't know."
- "Tell me about the good times."
- "What did you learn from that/them?"
- "I wonder if you felt/thought \_\_\_\_\_."
- "You've lost \_\_\_\_\_."
- "How did s/he die?"
- "How did you find out that the person died? Who told you?"
- "What was your immediate reaction after hearing about the death?"
- "Did you see him/her after s/he died? What was that like?"
- "Was there a funeral or memorial service? Did you attend? Did you have a role to play in it?"
- "What parts of that were difficult? What parts were ok?"
- "What memory of the person who has died makes you feel good?"
- "What would you have liked to be different?"