
Grief - how to support the bereaved

Summary

- Contact the bereaved person as soon as possible after their loved one's death and attend the funeral or memorial service if you can.
 - Allow the bereaved person to talk and express their grief in whatever way they need.
 - Concentrate your efforts on listening carefully and with compassion.
 - If you're unsure of how to support your grieving relative, friend or colleague, ask them.
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Sometimes it's hard to know how to offer support to a grieving relative, friend or colleague. We may be afraid of saying the wrong thing, so we say nothing at all, which can leave the bereaved person feeling isolated and alone.

If you haven't experienced the death of a loved one, you may have unrealistic expectations of how the grieving person should feel, or how quickly they should return to the activities of daily living, or get on with their life.

There are many things you can do or say to help, but remember that everyone's experience of grief is different. Some of your thoughts and suggestions may be appropriate and others may not be. If you're unsure of how to support someone who is grieving, ask them to tell you what they need or want. Just letting them know that you care and wish to help can provide great comfort.

How to help a bereaved person in the first few days

Suggestions on how to help a bereaved person in the first few days include:

- Contact the bereaved person as soon as possible after their loved one's death. This contact could be a personal visit, telephone call, text message, sympathy card or flowers.
- Attend the funeral or memorial service if you can. They need to know that you care enough to support them through this difficult event.
- Offer your support and ask them how they would like you to support them.
- Listen to them if they want to open up to you and try to suspend all judgement.

Grief isn't something you can 'fix'

It is a natural response when we know someone is upset to want to fix things for them. Following the death of loved one, however, the reality is that you can't 'fix' their grief. There is nothing you can say that will make a bereaved person feel better about their loss; but there are things you can do to provide comfort and support for them during this difficult time.

Listen with compassion to a bereaved person

The most important help you can offer is a willing ear. Allow the bereaved person to talk and express their grief in whatever way they need. This may include crying, angry outbursts, screaming, laughing, expressions of guilt or regret, or engaging in activities that reduce their stress, such as walking or gardening.

Some things to consider:

- Concentrate your efforts on listening carefully and with compassion.
 - Everyone's experience of grief is unique, so let them grieve their own way. Don't judge or dispute their responses to the death of their loved one. Criticising the way they express their grief is hurtful and may make them less likely to share their thoughts and feelings with you.
 - If they don't feel like talking, don't push them. Remember that you are comforting them just by being there and sitting together in silence is helpful too.
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- Don't forget the power of human touch. Holding the person's hand or giving them a hug can be helpful, but make sure you check that it's okay with them first.

Practical help for a grieving person

You can show the grieving person that you care by offering practical help, such as:

- Do some of their housework, such as cleaning or clothes washing.
- Answer the telephone for them.
- Bring over pre-cooked meals that only need to be reheated before serving.
- Take over some of their regular duties, such as picking up the children from school.
- Be mindful that they may not want you to support them in this way and their requests should be respected.

Approaches to avoid with a bereaved person

Approaches to avoid include:

- telling them about your grief experience instead of listening to them
- comparing their grief with yours or anyone else's
- describing the 'stages of grief' and suggesting they're not moving through the stages quickly enough
- telling them they're grieving in the 'wrong' way
- giving them unsolicited advice about how they can best get over their grief
- reasoning with them about how they should or shouldn't feel.

Comments to avoid

It is a natural reaction to want to ease the person's pain. However, well-meaning words that encourage the bereaved to 'look on the bright side' can be hurtful.

The type of comments that should be avoided include:

- 'You'll get married again one day.'
- 'At least you have your other children.'
- 'She's lucky she lived to such a ripe old age.'
- 'It was God's will.'
- 'You can always try for another baby.'
- 'He's happy in heaven.'
- 'Be thankful they're not in pain anymore.'
- 'Try to remember the good times.'
- 'You'll feel better soon.'
- 'Time heals all wounds.'
- 'Count your blessings. You still have a lot to be grateful for.'
- 'You've got to pull yourself together and be strong.'
- 'I know exactly how you feel.'
- 'Everything happens for a reason.'

Grief over time

Grief is a process, not an event. It doesn't have a timeline, and it is not unusual for grief to be felt over an extended period of time – whether it be months, years, or even decades after the person's death.

Some things to consider:

- Don't shy away from the bereaved person after the funeral. Keep in contact, even just by phone.
- Never suggest that it's time they 'got over it' and moved on with life. Appreciate that the person may continue to grieve in subtle ways for the rest of their life.

- Don't change the subject if the deceased person naturally comes up in conversation. The bereaved person needs to know that their loved one hasn't been forgotten. Use the name of the deceased person in conversation. Avoid using words like he or she.
- Remember, there will be days in the year that will be particularly difficult for the person to bear, such as anniversaries, significant occasions and the birthday of the person who has died. Be sensitive to these times and offer your support.

When to seek further help for grief

Although grief can be very painful, most people (85 to 90 per cent) 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 circumstance of the death may have been particularly distressing, such as a traumatic, sudden or unexpected death, or there may be circumstances that make the grief particularly acute or complicated. Consider suggesting your friend or relative seeks professional help if, over time, they seem to be struggling to manage their day-to-day life.

Where to get help

- Your **GP (doctor)**
- Your local community health centre, hospital or palliative care service
- A trained bereavement counsellor
- **NURSE-ON-CALL** Tel. **1300 60 60 24** – for expert health information and advice (24 hours, 7 days)
- **Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement** – bereavement counselling and support services Tel. **(03) 9265 2100** or **1800 642 066**
- **Lifeline** – crisis support and suicide prevention services Tel. **13 11 14** (24 hours, 7 days)
- **SuicideLine Victoria** Tel. **1300 651 251** – for counselling, crisis intervention, information and referral (24 hours, 7 days)
- **GriefLine Community and Family Services Inc.** – loss and grief telephone counselling service, 12 noon to 3 am, 7 days a week Tel. **(03) 9935 7400** or **1300 845 745**

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