

Helping Someone Who is Grieving

Grief is a natural process of adjusting to a significant loss. It is much like a roller coaster, not the same each day. Some days the grieving person is focused on their pain; other days they may feel less distressed or even have a “good” day. Often people in grief feel like they are going crazy, because their responses can be wide-reaching and can be manifest in physical, emotional, mental or spiritual issues.

While every person grieves every loss differently, all people may experience a number of changing emotions, including sadness, anger, guilt, shame, ambivalence, and confusion. Some people will express their grief more emotionally or by crying; others may be “action takers” or work their responses out by exercising, writing, or some creative action. All of those styles are normal, but grieving people are often uncomfortable and embarrassed at the changes they are experiencing and how they respond to things.

Grieving people may become easily overwhelmed with too much sensory or cognitive input, and their energy levels may vary from hour to hour. Sleeping and eating habits may be disrupted. All of these things can be complicated by diminished memory and concentration powers.

Grief takes a long time to become integrated into our lives. Don’t assume that someone has forgotten or moved beyond their grief several months after the loss; that’s often when some people begin to experience the greatest pain.

We have a tendency in our culture to avoid grief and grievers because we do not know what to do, what to say, or how to comfort the person. It is important, however, that we reach out rather than do nothing to avoid hurt feelings of abandonment and rejection for the bereaved. Loss of contact with family and friends is yet another loss which adds to the experience of grief.

Supporting a grieving person is about allowing them to experience their grief rather than to “make it all better,” “take away the pain,” or “fix it.” Your efforts will make a difference, even if at times it may not seem so.

How can you support someone you care about who has suffered a loss?

Be a good listener. It is more important to listen than to talk. Listen when they want to talk with acceptance and without judgment. People may need to tell and retell their story. Most people want (at least intermittently) to talk about who or what they lost. Give them the choice every day to decide what they want that day.

Communicate Caring. Your presence, a hug, caring touch, or an arm around the shoulder can give comfort and a sense of understanding. Help can often come simply in silence, being willing to spend time with them, especially when they are feeling low or like they’re not much fun. It’s better to say “I’m sorry for your loss,” or “I don’t know what to do exactly but I want you to know I care about you,” than to avoid them out of discomfort. Send a written note, recalling special memories, a shared event, a special quality of the person, or how the person touched and influenced your life.

Acknowledge the person's feelings. Allow them to express their feelings without judgment. Avoid saying things like, "You shouldn't (or don't) feel that way or You shouldn't say that." Provide reassurance that feelings are normal. Do not take expressions of anger or hostility personally.

Share your feelings. Speak from the heart. Express your sadness and sorrow about the loss. Don't be afraid of tears—theirs or yours. Share your own story of loss when asked or if the time feels right.

Avoid giving advice. We can never understand another person's loss. Let your own similar losses inform your caring without comparing or imposing your story on their story. It can be helpful to tell them how you coped without giving them advice about what they should do. Avoid saying, "If I were you..." but if asked, you might phrase suggestions along the lines of, "You might consider..." or "What helped me was..."

Offer specific help. Reach out to them rather than expecting that they will know what they need and waiting for them to call you. Offer concrete help, like "Can I give you a ride to class?" or "Can I make those phone calls for you?" They often won't know exactly what to ask for. Help them take care of simple physical needs, like getting nourishing food, drinking enough water, getting enough sleep and exercise, and most importantly, having people around them who are willing to help them.

Provide continuing support. Continue to express support throughout the grieving process, not just immediately after the loss. Help people find a number of sources of support. Close friends, family, casual acquaintances and classmates all play different roles in support. Check in during important times, such as after friends and relatives have left and during significant days and dates, like death anniversaries (including 1 month, 6 months, 1 year, 2 years, etc.) birthdays, wedding anniversary, holidays, weekends, and evenings.

Give the Person Time. Give the adjustment process of grief the time it requires. Don't expect them to be really productive. Give them permission to need more down time than they did before the loss. Don't take it personally if they don't act the same as they did before. Honor the relationship you had with them before the loss. Don't abandon them, especially when you are uncomfortable because you don't know what to say or how to act with them. They are in a time of deep change and need support and time to be exactly where they are.

Don't minimize the loss. Avoid using clichés, giving easy answers, or false reassurances. Avoid statements like, "He had a good life" or "Time heals all wounds" or "It's better now, she is no longer suffering." Do not attempt to tell them how they feel, but rather attend to their feelings, communicating understanding, acceptance and respect.

Know your limits as a helper. Learn to recognize when your body and emotions are strained. Don't promise more than you can do. Know your limitations emotionally and how much time

you can reasonably invest. Make agreements to tell them when you can and can't support them so they will feel comfortable coming to you without worrying about burning you out.

If you find yourself upset or troubled after you have been with someone who is grieving, find someone to talk to, take a run, journal about your feelings, or take a bath. Please feel free to call HospiceCare if we can help you or give you ideas about how to help your friend. Grieving is hard work, for those going through the loss, and sometimes for those who care about them too.

© 2007 HospiceCare of Boulder and Broomfield Counties

