

Often people feel unsure about how to help someone who is grieving after a death. What most people need after a loss is comfort and caring from family and friends. Listening, running errands or simply being present are a few examples of how you might support a grieving person.

National Hospice and Palliative Care
Organization

CaringInfo



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InfoLine 800.658.8898
Multilingual Line 877.658.8896
www.caringinfo.org • caringinfo@nhpco.org

Supporting Someone Who is Grieving

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The following are possible ways you might be of help during this stressful time:

Listen

Listening is the greatest gift you can give someone who is grieving. Ask them to tell you about the person who died. Encourage them to talk about their relationship and their memories. Respond to emotions as they arise, try to be comfortable with tears, and take time to listen.

Accept all feelings

Expressing emotions is a natural and necessary part of the grief process. Do not pass judgment on how “well” the grieving person is or is not coping. Everyone grieves in their own way, and in their own time.

Offer hope

Many people who are grieving have difficulty imagining they will ever be happy again. Believing in your friend or relative's ability to get through this time will strengthen them. In time, with your support, they will rediscover their own inner strengths.

Respect individual needs

Someone who is grieving may want to spend time alone. The person may decline offers to visit or may not return phone calls. These are signals that the person may need to withdraw for a while; it is important to respect their need for privacy.

Understand and accept cultural and religious perspectives about death that may be different from your own

It is important to understand that the way someone experiences loss may be shaped by cultural, religious and family traditions. Many cultures and religions have specific rituals when a person dies. Interfering with, restricting or judging these practices may complicate the grief process.

Avoid clichés

It is common to feel helpless when you care about the person who is grieving. Although you may be tempted to say something you think might be helpful, it is better to err on the side of listening. Avoid clichés such as: “At least he didn’t suffer,” “I know how you feel,” “God won’t give you more than you can handle.” It is best to be honest and say “I don’t know what to say ” or “I’m so sorry.”

Make specific offers of help

Instead of saying “please call me if I can help,” it is best to offer to help with a specific chore such as caring for a child, preparing a meal, running errands, doing housework, helping with yard work, or shopping. For example, suggest “I’ll bring dinner on Thursday, how many people will be there?” If Thursday doesn’t work, ask what night will. Specific offers of help are less stressful to the grieving person, as the person does not have to spend time thinking of a response to an open ended question such as “What can I do to help you?”

Help the person ease back into activities

When they seem ready, help the person renew interest in past activities and hobbies or discover new interests. An example is, “Would you like to go to the museum on Saturday to see the new exhibit?” The person may not feel ready to do what you asked, so understand if your offer is declined and ask again after some time has passed.

Remember to check on your friend or relative as time passes and months go by

Periodic check-ins can be helpful throughout the first two years after the death. Stay in touch by writing a note, calling, stopping by to visit, or perhaps bringing flowers.

Be sensitive to holidays and special days

For someone grieving a death, certain days may be more difficult and can magnify the sense of loss. Anniversaries and birthdays can be especially hard. Some people find it helpful to be with family and friends, others may wish to avoid traditions and try something different. Extend an invitation to someone who might otherwise spend time alone during a holiday or special day, and recognize they may or may not accept your offer.

If you think your friend or family member needs more help than you can offer, talk to him or her about contacting a local hospice. Hospices throughout the country offer grief support to anyone in the community who has had a loss through death, not just to those who were cared for by hospice. Hospice has bereavement professionals that specialize in grief and loss and can offer further suggestions or sources of support. Hospice can also provide guidance or resources on how to support others who are grieving. To find a hospice in your area, or for more information, visit www.caringinfo.org or call 800-658-8898.