

Comforting Others in Grief *Suggestions for friends and family*

As a caring friend or family member, you may find yourself at a loss of what to do or say in the face of a loved one's grief. During these times it is helpful to know that there is nothing that you can “do” or “say” that will make his or her pain go away. Rather than trying to fix the problem, you can make yourself available to your loved one in the following ways:

Continued support. Your friend is likely to need additional support during the first year following his or her loss. Typically the bereaved person is inundated with phone calls and visits immediately after the death, followed by a period of “silence” from their community. You can help make your friend feel supported by continuing to make phone calls every now and then to check-in and say hello. You may also choose to write a note that includes a warm, caring sentiment to let your friend know that you are thinking of them. To ensure continued support, try putting reminders on your calendar.

Make a date. In addition to checking-in over the phone or with a note, you may also want to set a date with your friend on a weekly or monthly basis. Ask your friend to join you for a walk or a meal. Low-stress activities are often the best, so avoid crowded or noisy spaces. For example, suggest watching a movie at home rather than going to the movies. Don't take it personally if your friend rebuffs offers or doesn't return every phone call. Keep trying.

Help out. When a person is grieving they may find it difficult to ask for the help that they need. This does not mean that they don't need it! You can help support your friend by offering to do specific things. For example, volunteer to shop or do laundry, bring dinner, make phone calls, etc. Anticipate needs that may arise in the future like cleaning the gutters or changing the oil in the car. A close friend or family member might also offer to help go through papers or belongings of the deceased whenever the bereaved person is ready to do so.

Listen well. A sympathetic ear is often the best support that you can offer as a caring friend or family member. Avoid giving unsolicited advice and steer clear of such phrases as “It's God's will” or “It's for the best” unless your friend says this. Often, people work through grief and trauma by telling their story over and over. Frequently, those who are grieving really wish others would *just listen*. It's your understanding – not usually your advice – that is most sorely needed.

Talk about the deceased. A fear may exist that if you discuss the deceased it will make your friend feel sad. However, your friend is likely feeling sad and thinking about the deceased anyway. Talking about the deceased is not likely to make your friend feel sadder, although it may prompt tears. Many people say that it is comforting to know that other people are thinking of the person who died, too. Don't be afraid to share funny or warm anecdotes that show how important to you or wonderfully special the deceased person was. An exception to this is cultures in which mentioning the dead is taboo or bad luck.

Be patient. Your friend's life and emotional landscape have changed enormously, possibly forever. You may wish that he or she would "move on" or "snap out of it." However, you can't speed the process of recovery. Let your friend heal at the pace that feels right for him or her. A worthwhile approach will be to accept the path that your friend chooses and avoid judgments.

Some helpful words from those who are grieving:

The Caring Friend

*When we honestly ask ourselves:
which persons in our lives mean the most to us,
We often find that it is those who,
instead of giving much advice, solutions, or cures,
Have chosen rather
to share our pain and touch our wounds with a gentle and tender hand.
The friend who can be silent with us
in a moment of despair or confusion,
Who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement,
Who can tolerate not knowing, not curing, not healing,
and face us with the reality of our powerlessness...
That is the friend who cares.
-Henri Nouwen*



The Elephant in the Room

*There's an elephant in the room.
It is large and squatting, so it is hard to get around it.
Yet, we squeeze by with, "How are you?" and "I'm fine."
...and a thousand other forms of trivial chatter.
We talk about the weather. We talk about work.
We talk about everything else- except the elephant in the room.
We all know it's there – we are thinking about the elephant as we talk.
It is constantly on our minds, for it is a very big elephant.
But we do not talk about the elephant in the room.
Oh, please, let's talk about the elephant in the room!
For if we talk about their death, perhaps we can talk about their life.
Can I say my loved one's name and not have to look away?
For if I cannot, you are leaving me –alone- in a room...
With an elephant.
-Ann Lander*