

What You Can Do for a Grieving Friend
Condensed from Woman's Day
Jo Coudert

My best friend's husband called me from the hospital. As soon as I hear his voice, I knew the worst. Their lovely 19-year-old, Hilary, was going to die. "It's spread," he said, sounding rough and angry. "They don't hold out much hope. Molly's with her now."

"Oh, David..." I whispered, searching for words. What does one say at such a moment? What phrases could possibly be a match for the pain and awful facts?

None. A man whose son was killed by a drunk driver had taught me that. He said: "I hated people saying 'I know how you feel' or 'I share your pain.'" How could they know the misery as sharp as a thousand splinters of glass inside me? How could they share that?"

"What could they say?" I asked. He thought a minute. "All I wanted them to say was 'I'm sorry.' It was the only thing that meant anything to me."

Remembering, I said, "David, I'm so sorry. I'm so very sorry."

And later that night, when I met Molly at their front door and we clung to each other, I said, "I'm so dreadfully sorry." After a while, I told her, "I've made fresh coffee. It's on the stove. I'll be back at about nine in the morning."

That's something else I have learned. Not to ask, "What can I do?" but that think of something that may be welcome, like fresh coffee, then do it. "The best thing a friend did for me when my mother died," said a teacher. "Was to call say, 'I'm bringing dinner tomorrow night. If you don't need it, just put it in the freezer.'"

People in shock can scarcely hear the well-meant "What can I do?" let alone summon up a vision of what needs to be done. The biggest help may be a specific offer: "I'll walk the dog" or "I'll stay here to answer the phone if you like." The suggestion allows the person to say no if what you're offering is an intrusion.

Molly barely looked up when I arrived at nine the next morning. She was on her hands and knees scrubbing the kitchen floor. Only when I noticed she was polishing the same spot over and over did I realize she was scrubbing to keep from going to pieces. The stove didn't need cleaning, but I started on it anyway.

When there was nothing more to clean, I said, "Come on, Molly, we're going for a walk." I didn't ask if she wanted to; how could Molly be asked to want anything but her daughter well and alive? I took her arm, and we walked through the pine woods behind her house until we came out at the pond where our families picnicked. We stared across the winter water. Dark and still, it was not the friendly pond of summer, but cold and bottomless.

“I wonder if death is like that,” Molly finally said.

I longed to cry out, “No, no, it must be kinder.” But I echoed, “I wonder.”

She said, not really to me, “How am I going to get through the next weeks?”

I forced myself not to be reassuring. “I don’t know, Molly,” I answered quietly. “I just don’t know.”

Months later, she told me that was the moment she knew she would find a way. I knew what she meant for once it had happened to me. People said well-meaning things, like “You have to be brave” and “You’ll get over this.” But all I thought was, *You’re not me. You don’t understand.* Then someone said, “It’s going to be very, very hard; you’ve got a long way to go,” and suddenly I knew I was going to make it. Someone had listened to me, and heard my despair, and instead of trying to talk me out of it, had accepted it.

Molly asked whether I thought she and David should be honest with Hilary or try to pretend her illness wasn’t serious.

Do people want to be spared the knowledge they are dying? If you listen carefully, the dying person himself will often let you know. Doctors say they hear it in how a question is phrased. If a patient says, “I don’t have cancer, do I?” it is likely he does *not* want to know. But if he says, “I have cancer, don’t I?” then he may be ready to talk about it.

Dying is a lonely business if you can’t share your feelings. Physicians at the University of California Medical Centre in San Francisco found that, of a group of children with leukemia, the ones whose parents denied the seriousness of their condition were the loneliest because they had no one to talk to about their fears.

This is not to say that family or friends should insist on the truth even if the patient doesn’t want to hear it. That happens sometimes, I think, when people want to prove they can talk fearlessly of dying. But you should not be brave on someone else’s time. Let them tell you what *they* want to know.

That’s what Molly decided to do with Hilary. As it turned out, the doctor had seen Hilary and she had asked him, not *what* she had, but how long. He had told her weeks. She was dressed when Molly got there. “Please, Mom,” she said, “take me home. That’s all I really want now—to be home with you and Dad.”

One evening after supper, Molly finished the dishes and went quietly down the hall. The only light in the living room was firelight. Hilary and her father, almost hidden in easy chairs, were talking—sometimes as father and daughter, sometimes as two people trying to find their way in a sea of mystery.

Quite easily and naturally, David asked Hilary, “If this new drug doesn’t work as we hope, is there anything you want us to know?”

“That I loved you and Mom, always,” said Hilary softly, “even when I acted like I didn’t. That I’d like to be buried in the little country cemetery we found that day we were driving in the valley. And that I hope you won’t throw my diaries away. I’d like you to put them as far back under the eaves in the attic as possible—and to leave them there even if you move. Then maybe someday somebody will find them and read them, and it won’t be like I never lived.”

“Imagine what we would have missed,” Molly said after Hilary was gone, “if we couldn’t have talked of her dying. We wouldn’t have known her wishes. We could have missed what, in a funny way, was the best part of our lives together because we were so extraordinarily close and open with each other those last days.”

That closeness, that openness, can come about not just with families, but also with friends. The point of visiting is not to dump your own burden of woe on the counterpane, any more than it is to match stories of sickness and suffering. But you can listen to cues. And if the person seems to want to explore deeper waters and you are courageous enough to follow, it can be an incomparable time of intimacy and trust.

After a person has died, your thoughts turn to what you can do for the survivor. Again, be there, listen to them, and accept their grief.

I was struck by the grace of Hilary’s friends who came to the house the day after her death to say a few words and to hug Molly and David. They must have thought, *Hilary’s parents won’t want to see anybody but family at a time like this or other friends were closer than I was.* But they came. “I’m sorry,” they said. “I loved her and I’m going to miss her.” It was enough.

Hilary’s tennis partner asked if he could have the small silver plate inscribed with her initials from the heel of her racket; he wanted to put it on his own, he said, in her memory. And a neighborhood youngster said how kind Hilary had always been to her, and could she please have Hilary’s yellow T-shirt to hang in her room? O was a bit taken aback at these requests until she saw how it pleased Molly and David to know that Hilary’s friends wanted to remember her.

A young man Hilary had gone out with a few times called from across the country to say how sorry he was. To my surprise, Molly started chuckling in the middle of the phone call. The young man was telling her a funny tale of a day he and Hilary went white-water rafting and tipped over. For a few moments Hilary, young and happy, was alive again.

Did the young man stop to think that he wasn’t a close friend? A friend of mine did, when she heard that someone she knew casually had lost her parents the same week. My friend reached for the telephone, stopped, then reached again, thinking, *Oh well, she doesn’t have to talk to me if I’m intruding.*

An hour later, they were still chatting, for the woman had been feeling terribly alone. The friendly, unexpected voice was a lifeline pulling her back to a warmer world. She still speaks of how grateful she was for that.

Curiously, our impulses in such circumstances are usually right. It's our second thoughts that trip us up. We have to learn to ignore the voice that says, *Oh, they won't want to hear from me or Somebody else will call.*

Do call, Do go. Don't be put off by the thought that you won't know what to say. To bring support to someone in crisis requires only this: Be there.