

10 Ways to Love a Grieving Friend

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Recently, one of my dear friends lost her husband in a freak accident, and then a month later a car crash killed her only sister and niece. It stunned our circle of friends. Nobody knew what to do or say. When tragedy enters your world, these things may be useful:

1) The situation is real, so be real: Unless it is a cultural taboo, do not shy away from mentioning the dead person's name or talking about the situation. If he or she had been arrested, you would use their name and talk about the details. A horrible thing has happened, and many people are hurting. It sucks, so do not waste your friend's time by saying things like, "He or she is in a better place" or, "It was God's plan." 1) You do not know this, and 2) what kind of God plans something like this? It is better to share your true thoughts and ask what they are thinking. Even if your true thoughts are, "I do not know what to say," or "What are we going to do?" If it comes from the heart, it will go to the heart.

2) Call them frequently: Keep in mind this is not about you. Not everybody likes to grieve publicly. Some people just need to be left alone. Respect that, but people need to know you are there. Therefore, call them and say, "Call me back when you are ready to talk. Do not worry about calling back right away. I am as close or as far away as you need me to be."

3) Talk about the deceased: Tell funny anecdotal stories. Laughter is healing. In great sorrow, there is great potential for laughter. Likewise, memories do not leave, even though people must. Remembering events that involved the deceased person serves a reminder that there will be a part of that person that is not gone. It is soothing.

4) Help with specific tasks: Offer to pick people up at the airport, make calls to notify family and friends, help with the funeral arrangements, or just answer the phone. Bring some food, pitch in and help clean up around the house, cut the grass, shovel the snow, or rake the leaves.

5) Be sensitive: Look and listen to your friend. People grieve differently. Culture, religion, ethnicity, education, and economics play a major role in this. Never impose your beliefs on someone else, and never question their beliefs.

6) Respect hierarchy: Many will balk at this, but I stand by this. When someone dies and his or her parents survive them, unless previously stated by the deceased, the parents' wishes take precedence over all others. The surviving spouse, the children and siblings follow respectively. Often times, death brings out the worst in families. Encouraging friends to respect hierarchy is the decent thing to do. It is also an easily justifiable solution for resolving bickering. There are extenuating circumstances of course, when this is not appropriate.

7) Listen: A sympathetic ear is a blanket for the soul. Just say, "Tell me all about it." Do not offer advice, unless asked. Just listen.

8) Make plans for later: When a person dies, the crowds come running to mourn. A week later, and it is business as usual. That is often when your friend needs you the most. Make concrete plans to do something for that week, and the week after. It does not have to be a trip to Disneyland. You do not have to leave the house. It could be a movie night with videos. It could be an in-home mani-pedi; your nails can never look too good.

9) Be yourself: Uncertainty is one of the difficult aspects of death. Familiarity is comfortable for the brain. By being yourself, you will be comforting your friend.

10) Offer to have the "Come to Jesus" talk with the idiot (s): Every family even always has an idiot, especially at funerals. It can be an ex-spouse, a relative, a sibling, or a child. Usually it is about some unresolved family matter. (Somebody offended somebody at Thanksgiving 1987 and two or more people have not spoken or been hostile to each other since, or some other issue that does not matter now.) The idiot(s) make a sad situation worse by harping on old issues when it is not appropriate. I say, do not hesitate to offer to get in somebody's face on your friend's behalf. They will probably say no, but be happy that you offered.

If they say yes, the trick is in how you get in someone's face. Many times people act out because that is all they know how to do. Other times the issue is about a larger family dynamic. People do things for a reason. Find out what the reason is, and maybe you can obviate the behavior by suggesting a way to address the underlying problem later. Sometimes, however, it comes down to saying, "Look fool, there is no need for two funerals and one trial. Now you need to straighten up or we are going to be on the news." The point is in tough times, you have to be tough. Sometimes that means going beyond what is socially proper, politically correct and comfortable.

Finally, there are no deals to make with God or the dark when death takes a bite out of your heart. You cannot make it better. Accepting that is the first step. Once you have done that, you can move on to the things I mentioned, which make it easier not better. Remember, a differential engine drives life. The lilies of joy that you will pick tomorrow grow in today's fields of sorrow. Remain fabulous and phenomenal!

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