

TEN WAYS TO EXPRESS YOUR SYMPATHY

By Kathleen Cruise

My world collapsed the day my husband died of lung cancer, and I found myself among the newly widowed. I was too numbed by shock and grief to answer those who said, "If there's anything I can do, let me know." But without waiting for an answer, many friends found an amazing variety of ways to express their loving concern.

By comparing notes with others that have experienced such a loss I have learned there are many ways to help – to convey the message, "I care."

1. Look for an immediate need and fill it

The first few days are filled with many things you can do. Offer to answer the telephone and call those who need to be notified; meet incoming relatives at the airport, train or bus depot; offer a spare room to an overnight visitor; provide transportation as needed; if there are children in the family, offer to baby-sit or take them out while funeral arrangements are being made; arrange with the family to stay at the funeral home when a host is needed.

2. Be there when needed

When my husband died our family was too far away to be with me immediately. One couple arrived within minutes of my phone call, helping me through the first few hours. Another friend came to spend the night. As time passed, relatives and friends took turns spending days with me so I could gradually adjust to being alone.

The day after my husband died, one friend took the day off from his job to help me make the necessary arrangements. Another friend also took time off from work to help with business transactions. For the first two or three weeks I felt I'd be a menace on the road, as I was unable to concentrate on driving. So I was deeply grateful for the offers to pick me up for dinner, for errands or whatever. One friend, knowing immediate cash might be needed, came by with a generous loan "to tide you over these next few days."

3. Provide food

I'm not sure why even the thought of preparing a meal looms as a Herculean task at this time, but it does. After my husband died, it was with relief and gratitude that I welcomed the casseroles, salads and desserts that people brought.

A young man I know, who was left with three small children, said, "The food that friends and neighbors brought was a lifesaver. There was enough left to put in the freezer for those nights when I came home from work faced with getting dinner for four. Friends and neighbors kept bringing me food until I found a housekeeper."

When taking food to someone's home, mark your dish so it doesn't get lost. Then go back later and pick it up so the family doesn't need to be concerned about returning dishes. It is even easier if you deliver your contribution in a container that can be discarded.

4. Send flowers or donate to a favorite charity.

When friends say "no flowers," consider sending a planter, terrarium or potted plant to the home. A few weeks later a single rose, a few flowers from your garden or a small bouquet from a roadside stand can brighten the day for your friend and show that you continue to care.

Donations to a charity or foundation in the name of the deceased are always thoughtful. If the person had a special interest, that too can offer possibilities. When a teenager I knew was killed in a motorcycle accident, his family requested donations to the humane society because of his love and concern for animals.

5. Reach out and touch.

Many people have a need – whether they recognize it or not – to be touched during a difficult time. People who are grieving can be greatly comforted by a kiss on the cheek, a warm hug or a hand-clasp. It's amazing how much a simple touch can communicate when words fail.

6. Listen

Listening can be one of the best ways to help a person work through feelings of grief. Most people's initial reaction to the death of a loved one is shock. There's a need to talk about the loss, because unexpressed grief often leads to prolonged depression. I will always cherish the card a friend sent with the words, "If talking helps, I am only a phone call away."

One minister cautions, "Don't be afraid of causing tears by encouraging a friend to talk. Crying expresses grief in a normal way." Above all, be sensitive to the mood of the bereaved family. While there are many times they may appreciate silence. Sharing this silence is another way of listening.

7. Send a note or make a phone call.

When you speak or write, you don't have to say very much to make your feelings known – a simple "We love you" speaks volumes. A condolence letter is easy to write if you keep a few special things in mind. It can be comforting to recall a shared event such as a dinner or picnic, or a special quality of the deceased. "We did so enjoy your mother's sense of humor," for instance, or "There will never be anybody with John's ability to..." or "Sally was the only woman any of us know who could..." These can be light or serious, anything from growing tulips to making people laugh to doing needlepoint. It is that something special that stands out in your mind about the person.

8. Encourage the bereaved to get out of the house.

On several occasions I was invited out to lunch or dinner and welcomed the opportunity to get out of the house and be with friends. Many people were especially sensitive to the times when I'd be alone for a few days. They would call and ask, "Do you still have company?" If the answer was no, they'd say, "We'd like you to have dinner with us. We'll come pick you up."

9. Give of your talent and experience

The day following my husband's death, our household plumbing chose the most inopportune time for a massive case of total non-function — kitchen, bathroom, laundry, the entire house. I frantically phoned a plumber friend for a referral. He said, "Don't worry; I'll come over myself." I will be forever grateful to him and another friend who worked most of the day to get things functioning before out-of-town relatives began to arrive.

When the wife of a friend was killed in a car crash, he needed legal advice and was most grateful when an attorney he knew donated his services.

One woman told me about a man with four young children whose wife died after several weeks in the hospital. Looking around for something she could do to help, the woman noticed an overflowing basket of mending. She gathered it up and took it home, returning the mended garments a few days later. The whole family was grateful.

10. Help in the days ahead

Too often relatives and friends surround a person, who has lost a loved one, for a week or so, then the house is empty. It is when people have swung back into their daily routines that friends are needed most — grief and loneliness last for many months.

Remember to stay in touch. See your friend more often than you did before, perhaps for lunch, shopping, a museum outing, a movie.

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