



# Helping Others Cope with Grief

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Death is real. It may hit very close to home. When someone dear to you experiences the loss of a parent, spouse, child, or other relative or friend, do you know what to say or do? Since a lifetime of memories and deep pain are left behind, working through that pain can be a long grueling process—mourning or grieving. Many of us wonder what we can say to the survivor. You don't want to further hurt or upset your friend. This article may help turn your concerns and cares into positive action.

## Listen

In a study of 125 grieving persons in a Tampa study, psychologist Catherine M. Sanders asked study participants what was most important in helping them through their grief. They overwhelmingly answered, "Friends, family, neighbors—anyone who would take the time to listen." It seems listening is more important than knowing what to say. Listening includes compassion and patience.

Listen with your heart. Begin with being an active listener; listen to understand and try to feel what the other person is experiencing. Your physical presence and desire to listen without judging are critical caring skills. Don't worry so much about what you will say. Just concentrate on listening to the words being shared. Don't expect to have answers; just have open ears and heart. Your friend may relate the same story over and over again. Listen attentively each time. This repetition is a major part of the healing and recovery process.

How do you let your friend know you are willing and ready to listen? First, consider offering your friend a safe place to talk. You might suggest going for a walk or out for coffee. Then, show concern for privacy by turning off the phone or going to a private area where you won't be disturbed. Offering food or drink can extend a message of caring and involvement that begins to build rapport.

Don't feel you must say something profound. Words, particularly clichés, can even be painful. Just know that your presence is enough. Especially with fresh grief, an embrace or touch, are all the mourner may need. Understand there are no ready phrases that will take away the pain of loss.

## Be Compassionate and Patient

Be compassionate by giving your friend permission to express feelings without fear of criticism. Never say, "I know just how you feel." You don't, won't, and can't know just how your friend feels! "Walk" with him or her through this journey, taking the lead from your friend. Allow your friend to experience the hurt, sorrow, and pain he or she is feeling. Don't try to minimize it or think you can take it away. Recognize that tears are natural and an appropriate expression of the pain associated with the loss. Don't be afraid of them. Since grief is personally unique, no one will respond to the loss of a loved one in exactly the same way.

Be patient. The process of grieving takes a long time. Allow your friend to proceed at his or her own pace. Don't force or expect a timetable for healing.

## Take the Initiative

Take the initiative. Don't merely say, "If there's anything I can do, give me a call." Intensely grieving people often don't know and many are unable to ask for what they might need. Instead, help in practical ways. Suggest times you would like to visit and what you will do to help. Just as with your presence, this support is needed, not only at the time of death, but also in the weeks and months ahead. To a person fatigued by shock and grief, little things mean a lot, so look for practical ways of helping to provide relief. Letting your friend know you think he or she is important and that you care enough to help does wonders for the recovery process.

## Learn from Them

Learn from them. Let's face it—death is inevitable. We're all mortal human beings. People with that understanding can be powerful teachers if they're ready and willing to listen. People who have experienced a close encounter with the reality of death are often wiser and more in touch with the things that really matter in life.

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July 2007—3452