

***“How You Can Help And Encourage
A Friend In A Crisis”***

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How You Can Help and Encourage a Friend in a Crisis

Very deep grief follows the death of a child. Even mature individuals have difficulty understanding how an innocent child can die. It feels terribly “wrong” to be predeceased by one’s child.

What do the mourners need from you? First, they need your ear. Allow them to express their thoughts and feelings over time, and accept all the feelings they reveal. Avoid criticizing or telling your friend not to feel that way. Be careful not to push. Find out how much the person wants to share or reveal. For example, ask, “Do you want to say more about it, or would you prefer to stop now?”

Listening is crucial in comforting others. It is not helpful to talk trivia or keep the conversation light in the mistaken belief that they won't think about the pain in their life. Don't talk business or give advice when your friends are suffering from a breaking heart.

When someone has lost a child, the only real remedy is to restore the child. Unfortunately, you can't do that. But attempting to minimize the loss or suggesting alternatives for fulfillment won't work. Yearning to have one's child restored is absolutely normal. Since you can't make things the way they were before, you are of greatest service if you simply support the person's suffering, rather than trying to “make it better.”

Once the loved one is ready, reminiscing about happier, healthy days and memories of the child as a fully functioning individual will help diminish the images of death. They also affirm the contributions the child made and help to balance the suffering of the child's last days.

Because of feelings that their child was cheated of life, it is important that the child be remembered in special ways. Mention his or her name often. Consider establishing a permanent memorial, such as a scholarship, or write a memorial poem about the child. Mention that support groups such as Compassionate Friends, Mothers Against Drunk Driving, and Parents of Murdered Children exist in most metropolitan communities to help parents cope with the death of a child.

Since survivors appreciate remembrances of the “good times” of their child, share these memories in a note sent after the funeral. Far more cherished than preprinted sympathy cards are handwritten notes that begin, “I'll never forget the time that . . .” or, “Let me tell you why _____ meant so much to me.” For an infant,

“_____ brought so much love into your family,” or, “You gave so much of yourselves in order that _____’s brief time here was filled with love.” A hand written note of special remembrances will be deeply appreciated, even from those who are not close enough to make a personal visit to the home.

On next year’s calendar, mark the birth date and death date so you can remember the family in a special way. Very few people remember the anniversary date of a death. For those dearest to the deceased, however, that date is indelibly imprinted on their minds. They will dread it. Many experience a resurgence of sadness and depression, not only on the death anniversary date but for weeks preceding it. To be remembered on these dates with a note, flowers, or other appropriate gift lets them know they are not alone in remembering.

“Helping a Neighbor in Crisis” p. 242-243, by Lisa Barnes Lampman

One of the biggest disappointments to grieving parents is that people say things that hurt instead of help. One mother said:

“I got so tired of people saying to me things I didn’t want to hear. They’d say, ‘She’s in a better place . . . it was a blessing . . . you’ll have another baby . . .’ It wasn’t a blessing to me. I didn’t want another baby – I wanted my baby in my arms. Why couldn’t they just let me have my own feelings and my own grief? I felt like I had to defend my right to grieve!”

Victims want

To tell their story again and again and again
To have all of their feelings accepted and believed
To be with others who have been through it

Likewise, victims don’t want

Encouragement to take medicine
Being told not to think about it
Being prematurely referred to support groups

Hurtful responses to avoid

“You’re lucky you have each other.”

“_____ is lucky not to have to suffer the difficulties of adult life.”

“You’ll be able to have more children.”

“You’re lucky you had so many years together.”

“You should be over it by now.” “You’ll get over this.”

“Time heals all wounds.” “He didn’t know what hit him.”

“You can always find someone worse off than yourself.”

“You must focus on your precious memories.”

“It’s better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all.”

“Call me if you need something.” Instead, call your friend and offer specific help. “I will call tomorrow, please let me know what you need me to do for you.”

“God cliches (DON’T)

It must have been his / her time.

Someday you’ll understand why.

It was actually a blessing because

God must have needed her more than you did.

God never gives us more than we can handle.

Only the good die young.

“I Know Just How You Feel . . .”

By Erin Linn

“God needs him more than you do . . .”

Instead, “We know you needed this person and feel a great sense of loss.”

“He is happy now that he is with God.”

Instead, “We wish we could take this hurt away.”

“You made his life so happy here on earth.”

“We know you hurt terribly.”

“You were such a special Mom to _____.”

“God needed some new flowers for His garden in Heaven.”

“God did this to teach us a lesson.”

“God did this to punish us for our sins.”

“God did this to show how powerful He is.”

Instead, “God is a caring God, He hurts when we hurt.”

“God never gives us more than we can handle.”

Instead, “This must seem like more hurt than you can stand to bear all at once.”

“I don’t know why something this awful happened to you.”

“Some things that happen are tragic and make no sense.”

“I know *exactly* how you feel.” “I know just how you feel.”

Instead, “I can’t begin to know how you feel because I have never had this happen to me. I just want you to know that I love you and hurt with you.”

“I can’t even imagine what you are going through.”

“God helps those who help themselves.”

Instead, “You don’t have to go through this alone.”

“It was God’s will.”

Instead, “We live in a broken, imperfect world. The residual fallout of that imperfection/brokenness continually appears around us in the form of sickness, natural disasters, tragedy, and death.”

“God didn’t originally make things that way, and He didn’t make you an object of His anger when you suffered what you did.”

“I just lost my father and I know how you feel.” “When he died I . . . “

Instead, “I don’t even know how you feel” The ones who have suffered a loss don’t want to hear about your scenario. Don’t compare your loss to the loss of your friends – each loss is very different, i.e. the loss of a baby to SIDS to losing a father.

“You’ll get over this eventually.” OR “As time passes you will get over this.”

Instead, “I hope and pray that you learn to live with this.”

Paraphrased from “I Know Just How You Feel” by Erin Linn, Publisher Mark, PO Box 6939, Incline Village, Nevada 89450

Helpful things to say or do when a friend is grieving

“I am so sorry.”

“I’m here for you.”

“I’ll be here to help you through this situation.”

“I’d like to help.” Then offer to do something specific, such as run an errand.

“You don’t have to be strong.”

“It’s okay to cry. I’m not afraid of tears.”

“How are your days going?”

“It’s harder than most people think.”

“Most people who have gone through this react similarly to what you are experiencing.”

“If I were in your situation, I’d feel very _____, too.”

Say nothing – just be there quietly.

Bring over a meal to share together.

Take a walk together.

Plant a special tree, shrub, or flower.

Is there such a thing as closure?

“There will never be any closure – it’s a matter of living with the reality of it.”
Arleen Allen – mother of Adriane Insognia who was a victim of a double homicide.

After a father accidentally ran over and killed his toddler daughter, he recounted how friends would say to him, “You’ll get over this.” The father replied, “You never get over it. We have learned to deal with it.”

After the SIDS of a little girl a couple shared how much they loved for people to ask them about their daughter. It gave them a chance to talk about her. This couple appreciated it when others would mention their daughter’s name.

This couple’s loss was like the analogy of losing a limb i.e., you never forget the loss of a limb but you learn to adapt. “Everyday, I mean everyday; there are reminders of the loss of our daughter.”

They suggest that friends acknowledge their loss . . . just be there . . . just be their friend. “Don’t try to “fix” our grief and pain. Please allow us the time to grieve our terrible loss.”

Accommodation suggests an adaptation to make room for a particular circumstance. Clinical experience suggests that it is to be preferred over the term *resolution*, which insinuates a once-and-for-all closure that typically is not achieved—or even desirable—after the death of a dearly loved one. The bereaved must make a series of readjustments to cope with, compensate for, and adapt to the absence of what has been lost physically and/or psychosocially. Failure to make the proper adaptations and re-orientations necessitated by the loss leaves the survivor related inappropriately to the lost person and the now-defunct old world.

There seems to be three groups that come to offer help after a tragic loss:

1. The “**avoiders**” don’t know what to say, so they don’t say anything. They look the other way. They avoid you. They talk about the weather, work, anything but the loss. They are uncomfortable and you know it.
2. The “**advisors**” have lots of pat answers, spiritual counsel, and advice that doesn’t help. They try to “fix” your problem. They may say, “You just have to go on with your life . . . God knows best . . . it’s been so long now . . . isn’t it time you cheered up? . . . just get back to your old self.” They think they have all the answers, but you know they don’t.
3. The “**advocates**” *care* and you can tell. These are the friends that offer practical, hands-on help, like cleaning your house, bringing you a meal, or baby-sitting your other children. And they offer honest comments, like “I can’t imagine what this must be like, but I want you to know I am here for you. I care about you. I love you. I want to help you however I can.” They bring comfort through their loving presence and practical help.

Advice to friends from those who mourn

1. Don’t rush me . . . accept my timetable.
2. Don’t try to take my grief away (I wish you could).
3. Don’t play the waiting game; please don’t stay away.
4. Don’t offer me a quick fix; don’t give advice.
5. Don’t forget me . . . I really need you.
6. Do be patient . . . give me time.
7. Do include me in your special activities and holidays.
8. Do talk with me about the memories that mean so much.
9. Do mention my baby’s name; most people won’t.

Suggestions to the employer:

1. Suggest to the employee that they come back to work the first day for a short period, i.e. an hour or so to say hello to fellow employees. This will be good not only for the employee but also fellow employees.
2. After that initial day, encourage the employee to “slowly” come back to work, i.e. a few hours each day, if they choose. Encourage them to stay as long as they wish and to leave work when they believe it is necessary.
3. Fellow employees should remember not to compare themselves among themselves in regard to how each responds to the crisis. Some will be more emotional while others will be less emotional. There is a tendency for each to think that something is wrong with the other, i.e. the emotional one thinks the non-emotional one is cold hearted, while the non-emotional one thinks the emotional one is too sensitive, wears their heart on their sleeve. Remember that each has a different personality and each will deal with the grief differently. There is no “right” or “wrong” way.

Support for the Helper

Supporting a grieving person can also be stressful for the helpers; they need to take care of themselves while also attending to the needs of the grieving person. Since helpers themselves are often grieving, they may need to address their own healing process. This may include having the opportunity to express their own emotions and turning to other friends for support.

Final Note

Just as there is no single pattern to grief, there is no single way to help a grieving person. Both the grieving person and any friend who is trying to help may feel unsure and uncomfortable. Either way, remember that it is important to be yourself. Furthermore, remember that as a friend, just by listening and being with the grieving person, you probably are helping more than you will ever know.

An important rule:

When grief is new, words should be few.

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