

# HELPING OTHERS AFTER TRAGEDY STRIKES

## WHAT TO SAY AND DO

There are many ways in which families, friends and professionals can be supportive of those who are grieving. Some have learned either through personal or professional experience. In assessing the needs of a grieving person, it helps to understand the circumstances. Do not assume that the death of a ninety-year old grandmother will be mourned in the same way as the death of a five-year-old child. There are enormous differences in the grief process that depend upon the age of the person who died, how he or she died (was it a sudden death, or did it follow a long illness?) and the gender of the survivor (in our society, it is usually more difficult for men than women to express their grief openly). Please consider the following guidelines as suggestions only. Most importantly, trust your heart and your instincts.

### 1. PHRASES THAT DON'T HELP

Don't try to lessen the loss with easy answers. It is more important for the bereaved to feel your presence than to hear anything you might say. You may have already said some of these phrases listed below, hoping to be comforting. If so, don't be hard on yourself or feel guilty; just avoid them next time. The following remarks are seldom helpful:

*"It was God's will."* (First, find out what the survivor's religious belief is and reinforce as appropriate)

*"Be thankful you have another child."* (This lessens the importance of the child who died)

*"I know how you feel."* (None of us knows exactly how someone else feels)

*"Time will heal."* (Time alone does not heal, though it helps. Everyone grieves at their own pace)

*"There must have been a reason."* (Perhaps not, life is not always fair or reasonable)

*"She isn't hurting anymore."* *"It must have been his time."* *"Things always work out for the best."*

### 2. DON'T FEEL THAT YOU MUST SAY SOMETHING

In most circumstances, YOUR PRESENCE IS ENOUGH. Especially with fresh grief, your embrace, touch or sincere sorrow, are all the mourner may need. Be sure to call or visit the survivor, no matter how much time has passed since the death. The griever still appreciates knowing you care.

### 3. TAKE THE INITIATIVE

Don't just say, *"If there's anything I can do, give me a call."* Instead say, *"I would like to mow your lawn on Saturday. Would that be alright with you?"* Or, *"I would like to plant the azalea shrubs that were given to Bill's funeral in your yard."* Or, *"May I go grocery shopping with you the first time out?"*

Each thoughtful gesture gives something of you and keeps the survivor from having to continually reach out for assistance. It also lets the survivor know you think he or she is important. Self-esteem is often low during the early months of grief, and knowing someone cares enough can help build morale.

### 4. HELP WITH EVERYDAY CONCERNS

You may run errands, answer the telephone, prepare meals or do the laundry. These seemingly minor tasks loom large to the survivor, for grief drastically depletes physical energy. An offer to spend an evening watching television together can be very comforting, especially to someone living alone.

## **5. ASSIST WITH THE CHILDREN**

If children are involved, show your love and support. Send them special cards, ask them to discuss their thoughts and feelings; they need good listeners too. Invite them on outings with your family. Children should not be shielded from grief, but occasionally they need a break from the sadness at home. Their parents may welcome a day of grieving privately. **Do not assume a child who seems calm is not in pain.**

## **6. LISTEN**

A bereaved person desperately needs a listener who is accepting, supportive and willing to listen patiently to often repetitive stories. The need to “tell the story” decreases as healing progresses. Each time the story is told, the finality of the death sinks in a little more. When feelings of anger, frustration, disappointment, fear and sadness are expressed, accept those feelings. If the survivor keeps them bottled inside, they will slow the healing process. Sharing thoughts and feelings lessens the stress. The increased stress experienced during early grief can lead to health problems for some people. Help your friend stay healthy by listening.

Expressing our “if-onlys” is important. However, if the survivor still talks repeatedly about a specific incident six months after the death, you might ask, “What could you have done differently?” After the response, come back with another question: “Then what might have happened?” Keep asking non-leading questions until the person concludes that, with the knowledge she had at the time, she did the best she could. Also, be aware of the differences between realistic and unrealistic guilt. If the feeling is based on reality, professional help may be called for.

## **7. ALLOW THE SURVIVOR TO GRIEVE IN HIS OWN WAY**

Don’t push the mourner to “get over” the loss. If he needs to rake leaves or chop wood to release energy and tension, let him. If he wants to pour over old pictures or read every book on grief, let him. **We all grieve in our own way.** Avoid being judgmental.

## **8. ACCEPT MOOD SWINGS**

Expect good days and bad days for some time. The highs and lows are part of the process. These feelings have been described as waves that sweep in uncontrollably. Gradually, the good days become more frequent, but bad days will occur even a year or more after the death of a loved one.

## **9. REMEMBER SPECIAL DAYS AND TIMES**

Double your efforts to be sensitive to the mourner’s needs during difficult times of the day or on days with special meaning, like holidays, the loved one’s birthday or wedding anniversary or the anniversary of the death. Mark your calendar so you will remember to reach out to the person on or before those special days.

## **10. DON’T PROTECT THE MOURNER FROM THE PAIN OF GRIEF**

The survivor must adjust to the fact that the loved one is gone. If you attempt to protect her from grief, you will get in the way. Grief is hard work and others cannot do it for the survivor, though they can help with encouragement and support, there is no easy way out. She must walk through the pain to come out on the other side, healthy and stronger.

## **11. ASSIST IN FINDING SELF-HELP GROUPS**

Many support groups exist to help grieving people feel less alone with their grief and can be very beneficial.

## **12. KNOW THAT RECOVERY TAKES TIME**

Don't expect the grieving person to be "over it" within a few weeks. Great waves of emotion may sweep in for many months and then, slowly, the intensity subsides. It doesn't happen a day after the funeral or even two months, as many people believe. Sometimes the real grieving is just beginning by then. It may be more than a year before you see the results of your caring and support, but when your friend smiles again and feels less pain, the reward will be there.

## **13. WRITE OR VERBALLY SHARE YOUR MEMORIES OF THE ONE WHO DIED**

During the first few months after a death, there is a tendency to focus on the survivors, while the survivors are focusing on the one who died. By relating your memories of the deceased, you are offering a precious memento to the grieving person. Your love and concern are shown not only in what you share, but also in the fact that you took time to do so.

## **14. DO NOT RUSH THE SURVIVOR**

Keep in mind that a grieving person is under extreme stress; do not press her to participate in outside activities until she is ready. Trust her to know what is best.

## **15. KNOW THAT YOUR FRIEND WILL ALWAYS REMEMBER HER LOVED ONE**

For the rest of her life, a tear may be shed when a special memory is recalled. Your friend is who she is today because of having loved that person. Denying the deceased's past existence denies a part of your friend. Love her past as well as her present, and your friend will be richer for it.



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