



Tips for supporting others through loss and grief

What do I say? What can I do?

What if its the wrong thing?

While you won't be able to take away the pain of someone's grief, being supportive in a range of ways can make a huge difference to their experience of loss.

"She was there for me and she kept caring. She didn't disappear when others did. It was such a relief knowing she was at the end of the phone, even though I hardly phoned her."

Annie

Many people feel uncomfortable being near someone in deep distress, so they avoid them. Don't let feelings of awkwardness stop you from reaching out to someone grieving. You may not know what to say or do, but that's okay. You don't need to have perfect words or answers. What's most important is to just be there for them. Grief can feel very isolating. Being around them and available can help them cope with the grief and begin to heal.

"It's not what you say or do, it's how you make a person feel."

These conversation openers can help to break the ice:

- Acknowledge the situation briefly. Example: "I heard that....." That will show that you are more open to talk about it with them, should they want to.
- Express your concern. Example: "I'm sorry to hear that this happened to you."
- Be genuine in what you say and you don't need to hide your feelings. Example: "I'm not sure what to say, but I want you to know I care."
- Offer your support. Example: "Please let me know what I can do for you."
- Regularly simply ask how they are, and don't assume you know how they'll be thinking or feeling on any given day. Show you're wanting to listen.

The better you understand grief and how it is a healing process, the better prepared you'll be to help someone grieving a loss. So, take time to learn about grief yourself. (www.skylight.org.nz has helpful information on this and can post you useful information for the specific situation.)

Realise that grief often involves extreme responses of all kinds. Reassure them that grief's normal, even though it can anything but normal for a while. Don't judge them or take their reactions personally.

Reassure them it's okay to grieve in their own way – everyone's different. Some people need more space than others. Some will cry. Other won't. Be respectful of this.

Listen. Listen with compassion. Listening is perhaps the most supportive thing you can do for someone grieving – if they want to talk with you. Grieving people need to share their pain with someone who will not judge them or want to keep giving them advice. Listening may mean hearing the same story, or versions of it, again and again. Listening well allows someone to release their thoughts and feelings and to start to process them. This is a really important part of their grief journey.

Don't attempt to force them to open up, but let them know you're happy to listen if or when they do feel like talking. Perhaps occasionally ask them, "Do you feel like talking?"

Be prepared just to sit in silence sometimes. Just being there can be very supportive. A supportive look, a hug or a squeeze of the hand are simple ways of expressing caring without words.

Avoid statements that begin with "You should" or "You will." They are too directive. Instead perhaps start with a phrase like: "Have you thought about. . ." or "You might like to. . ."

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The right help at the right time in the right way



If you've been through loss and grief yourself, only talk about your own experience if you think it would help – and choose the right time. Don't think your experience lets you know exactly what they're going through though. Saying "I know how you feel" to someone can be one of the most irritating comments you could make.

Know that adjusting to the loss will take time – even a long time. Don't push people to 'move on', or 'get over it' or make them feel like they're grieving for too long. Grief needs to take the time it needs to take. Rushing it can slow the healing process. The pain may lessen in its intensity over time, but their sadness may never completely go away.

Avoid assuming you know where their grief is at by their outward appearance. Inside they may be really struggling. Avoid putting pressure on the person to keep up appearances by hiding their honest feelings.

Many grieving people find it hard to ask for help, even if they've had an open invitation to ask for it. Offer practical help – perhaps liaise with others to give the help that is most useful. Provide options and only help when people are willing to accept it. Don't push. Make it easier for them by giving suggestions. For example, "I'm going to the shop so can I pick you up something?" or "I've just made lasagne. Would you like to come over or could I drop off some for you?" Be the one who takes the initiative. Many grieving people say they don't have the energy to be the first one to reach out. Ideas could be:

- Run messages, pick ups, drop offs etc
- Share a meal or hot drink - drop off a meal – drop off firewood – offer to mow lawns
- Help with arrangements, such as making phone calls, getting information, liaising with others,
- getting a translator if needed, getting appointments
- Answer phone calls , take messages, help welcome and look after guests
- Provide transport and offer company for appointments or meetings
- Do some housework – drop off firewood – offer to mow lawns
- Look after, collect, drop off or distract their children
- Look after their pets
- Walk or drive with them
- Go out with them for a meal or a movie
- Enjoy doing something together.

Be aware of your own personal issues of loss and grief. What are your own experiences of loss, your own beliefs and attitudes about grief and your own reactions to the person's situation? These things influence how you will respond to their grief. Be careful you don't impose your own style of grief and your own expectations on others.

Keep in touch. Let the person know you still care and realise grief is a journey by, for example, remembering anniversaries and special days. Phone, text, send a card, visit, email, share a meal, give a thoughtful gift...

But if the grieving person's reactions don't slowly begin to ease, or if they get worse, and if they have difficulty functioning in daily life, their grief may have evolved into a more serious issue. Encourage the person to get professional. A talk with their GP or a local counsellor could be a good first step. If the first person isn't helpful, encourage them to try someone else. Reactions that would be concerning include:

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- Extreme preoccupation with what's happened
 - Flashbacks, terrible nightmares or hallucinations
 - Extreme anger or guilt
 - Isolating themselves from others – avoiding work or other regular commitments
 - Neglecting personal hygiene and not looking after their own basic needs well
 - Abuse of alcohol or drugs
 - A depressed mood that doesn't lift at all and may seem to be getting worse
 - Strong feelings of hopelessness
 - Talking about dying or suicide.
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Take any talk of suicide very seriously and get them to professional help for assessment and assistance right away. Don't leave them alone, if possible. In a situation when you think that might harm themselves, or others, call 111.

To support others well, we need to take the time to look after ourselves as well. It can be very tiring and difficult supporting people through pain and distress. Make time to talk to someone you trust about your own thoughts and feelings about what's happened. Don't take on what you cannot manage. Always refer people to others if what they need is outside your knowledge or skill. Do things that will refresh you and that you enjoy. Find ways to relax and de-stress.

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