

When Your Friend is Grieving

What to Say and Do to Help

Friendship is one of life's most precious gifts. When your friend is bereaved, you have special opportunities to care—because friends are there through the “thick and thin” of life. Grief is filled with many unexpected turns, but as a friend, you can help.

What Your Friend Feels

Grief is more than an emotion—it is a collision of every emotion a human can possibly feel, shaking us “from top to bottom.”

Especially during the early months of your friend's grief, you may see the gamut of human emotion. Some of these emotional reactions are uncomfortable, but resist trying to “fix” him or her. What your friend most needs right now is your love and acceptance.

Anger, guilt, sadness, loneliness, and fear are some of the emotions you may see expressed in grief. Be aware, however, that these emotions are not “stages;” your friend will not “do the anger stage” and then move past it forever. Rather, most of these emotions are experienced throughout grief.

All these emotions and dozens of others are normal—but not everyone experiences all of the emotions. Grief is very personal and everyone's experience is somewhat unique.

Don't forget that the process of grief lasts much longer than most people would admit. While the pain becomes manageable, it often lasts a year or two and is often rekindled on holidays and anniversaries for many years.

What Your Friend Needs

The truth is that right now, your friend needs your *warmth* more than your *words*. Interviews with literally thousands of bereaved people reveal that the greatest way to communicate your friendship is by *being there*. A hug or warm handshake, a smile, and your presence communicate best that you are a friend during these days of intense pain.



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You can help your friend in practical ways, too. Inviting him to lunch will encourage your grieving friend to eat right—a real challenge for many people in grief. If you are both physically able, offering to join him or her on a walk or other activity you both enjoy can be great exercise. And offering to take the children for the afternoon can help your friend get some much-needed rest.

Your friend is in need of relationships, too. Grieving people need some time alone for reflection, but ongoing withdrawal can signal a deeper problem with depression that should be professionally evaluated.

Include your friend in activities but remember that grief is depleting—both emotionally and physically. Your friend will not likely have the energy to do everything well-meaning friends think he or she should do, so honor the right to decline your invitation.

Remember your friend's grief at holidays, birthdays, anniversaries of the death, and other special days. Don't be afraid to say his loved one's name and tell the stories that help you remember that person together.

Make a special effort to attend the funeral or memorial service. In our busy lives, we may think these events are optional, but they allow us to demonstrate support and solidarity. Though your friend will not likely remember what you say at those times, he or she will always remember that you made the effort to come.

What Your Friend Wants to Hear

“I don’t know what to say” is a common statement heard from people with a friend in grief. Here are some suggestions:

- Say “I don’t understand what you’re going through, but I’m here for you” instead of “I know just how you feel.” Even similar circumstances do not inform us about how another person deals with grief.
- Ask, “Can I help with the kids/airport pickups/business errands?” instead of saying “Let me know if there’s anything I can do.” Bereaved people need help but may not know exactly what nor want to impose on your willingness.
- Say, “I don’t know what to say but I care,” instead of comments like “It was just God’s will” or “She’s so much better off” or “Time

heals all wounds.” Don’t allow your words to make light of your friend’s experience.

- Give honest, simple answers to children instead of cliches and misinformation like “Your Daddy is on a long trip” or “Death is just like going to sleep.” Never tell children something they will have to later unlearn.

Your Friend’s Future

Death changes relationships, circumstances, roles, and people—and that’s okay. Your friend will need you to be a regular part of his or her life in coming months—probably even more than today. A card, a telephone call, or visit lets you say that you are thinking of him or her. Above all else, be ready to be there—to laugh, to cry, to help, to listen—just to be a friend.

This article was written by William G. Hoy. A nationally-known educator and counselor in the field of bereavement, Dr. Hoy oversaw the clinical counseling program at Pathways Volunteer Hospice until his recent appointment to the Medical Humanities faculty at Baylor University. Copyright ©2013, 2000 by GriefConnect, Inc. All rights reserved.

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