

# How to Help a Grieving Friend

By James Thomas

“When we honestly ask ourselves which person in our lives mean the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a warm and tender hand. The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate now knowing, not curing, not healing and face with us the reality of our powerlessness, that is a friend who cares.”

*Henri Nouwen, Out of Solitude*

Those who have come through grief often remark that the loving support of friends and family members made all the difference. But many people aren't sure what to say or do.

One widow said, "My husband died suddenly. From that day until this, my supervisor has not said one word to me about his death." Although an estimated 25% of employees in any given workplace are grieving, co-workers are often reluctant to bring up the subject. This just adds to a person's grief.

After the death of her son, a woman joined her church's bereavement support group. They give practical aid: "One person returned dishes to those who had brought food; another helped address thank you notes. A young man offered to mow the lawn and another offered to take her friend to church."

Grief has been described as the emotion that heals itself. During ancient times, stoic philosophers encouraged their followers not to grieve, believing that self-control was the appropriate response to sorrow. Well intentioned, but uninformed people still carry on this long-held tradition. We live in a society that encourages repressing the emotion of grief, as opposed to expressing it. The result is that many people either grieve in isolation or attempt to run away from their grief.

## ***Am I Qualified to Help?***

Perhaps you don't feel qualified to help. You may feel uncomfortable and awkward. Such feelings are normal, but don't let them keep you away. If you care about your sorrowing friend or relative, you are qualified to help.

In fact, simply communicating that you care is probably the most important thing you can do. The following suggestions are offered to help you reach out to a grieving friend.

### ***Communicate Warmth***

Give a hug or touch. These communicate warmth, caring and love. It's okay to say very little on an early visit. A press of the hand or a simple touch feels good and may be all that is needed. Accept silence. Your presence takes the place of words.

### ***Be Present***

The experiences of shock, denial, numbness and disbelief are nature's way of temporarily protecting the mourner from the reality of death. Feeling dazed, unable to concentrate or make decisions are common occurrences. Sometimes people drive to a store and can't remember how they got there. Quiet, caring, supportive companionship often is the greatest need. Just be there! Acknowledge that you too feel helpless. Do not offer easy answers or explanations.

### ***Be Yourself***

Bring flowers, bake cookies, and write a letter. Taking time to write about memories of the person who died will bring ongoing comfort, as it can be read over and over again. Offer to prepare a meal, clean the house or care for the children. This kind of help lifts burdens and creates a bond.

### ***Listen!***

Accept whatever feelings are expressed. Anger, frustration, and guilt are sometimes difficult to hear and should not be taken personally. Anger is often addressed toward those who are most trusted. It is necessary for those in grief to recognize and articulate these feelings in order to process them for healthy healing.

### ***Respond with Empathy***

When it is time to speak, do so simply and quietly. Helpful statements which convey acceptance are:

"It must be very hard to accept."

"That must be very painful."

"I'm sorry."

"I wish I could take the pain away."

"It's okay to be angry with God."

### ***Avoid Clichés***

Statements such as those listed below increase the pain and anger of grief.

"You can have other children."

"You will marry again."

"Time heals all things."

"It's God's will."

"I know how you feel."

### ***Keep in Touch***

You may think you're being considerate by leaving the person alone, but the griever often feels abandoned. Visits and phone calls can be very helpful.

### ***Be Patient***

Grieving can take anywhere from a few months to years. There is no timetable for grief. There is nothing wrong with a family that remembers, cares and cries, even after years of loss. Beware of setting deadlines by statements such as "Don't you think you should be over this by now?"

### ***Use the Deceased Person's Name***

Remembering events shared together and using the deceased person's name in normal conversation are indications that the person's life was of value and memories of good times will last.

### ***Tears are Healing***

Crying is nature's way of releasing internal tension in the body and allowing the mourner to communicate a need to be comforted. Sharing tears indicates a willingness to enter into grief work and conveys a sense of feeling understood. Tears may express acute pain or the joy of memories. Avoid saying, "Don't cry," or pushing tissues toward someone who is crying. Offering a tissue is sometimes seen as a signal that the person should stop crying.

### ***Faith and Grief***

In the grieving process, people experience resentment and often look for someone to blame. They may blame God for causing pain or for not preventing it. A crisis of faith challenges people to ask, "Is there a God?" or "Why is God letting this happen to me?" Prayer can be very difficult during times of severe loss because there is so much in the way: denial, anger, depression or painful feelings. You might ask if they have a source of spiritual support that might be of help. You can also offer to remember them in your prayers.

***Grief is a Process. Recovery is a Choice.***

Eventually grieverers will be ready to move on and make a new life. As helpers, you can:

- Assist, but do not push the person, in finding new ways to approach their life.
- Let them know that changes are okay.
- Remind them that their memories are always with them.
- Invite them to go places with you.
- Be there to listen to their concerns about their changing roles.
- Encourage them to reach out and be involved with other people.
- Remember to plant seeds of realistic hope.