

Helping Someone in Need

When someone we care about is grieving, we may feel a tremendous sense of helplessness and concern. How to help a grieving spouse, child, sibling or parent can seem overwhelming. We can find ourselves struggling to say the right thing – or at least not say the wrong thing. It seems easier at times to just refrain from saying anything at all, and yet we know in our hearts that’s not quite right.

Listen with care and be present

We can’t fix this situation, no matter how sincere our intentions. There are no “right words” that make loss any less difficult than it is. The greatest gift, in fact, is not speaking: it’s listening. Simone Weil wrote, “The love of our neighbor in all its fullness simply means being able to say, ‘What are you going through?’” The invitation to talk and our willingness to *listen* – patiently, quietly and without judgment – is almost always appreciated by those who are grieving.

Respect pain and offer hope

If we find ourselves listening much, much more than we’re talking, we’re probably getting it right. When we do respond, reflective listening is best. Re-stating what we’ve heard assures the griever that their feelings have been accepted and respected. With work and time and adjustment, grief will lighten, but it’s not helpful to attempt to convince a griever that this experience isn’t so difficult or that worse things have happened to others. On the other hand, if a griever expresses hope for a future that isn’t as difficult or painful, it’s good to agree or affirm your hope for them – but the hope has to come from them first. If we’re attempting to lighten or minimize the experience, we’re not respecting the grieving person’s current and very real pain, not meeting them where they are.

If we offer a listening ear and the person can’t share or go into the deep grief place at that particular time, it’s important not to take it personally. Most grievers experience times when they are very open to talking about their loss and other times when it feels too overwhelming to get into. The simple response, “I am here for you when you need me,” (and then making sure we’re willing to be) is helpful in itself.

Make specific offers to help

Instead of issuing an open invitation to “Call if you need anything,” it’s more helpful to suggest the things we’re good at and willing to do. Offering specific assistance at a certain time (or within a time frame) is most appreciated. Offer meals, baby-sitting, a ride to the doctor, company on errands, help with the garden, or a landscaping or cleaning service if that’s feasible. Lifting the burden a bit is a tremendous and very real help.

Keep it simple

When someone you care about is grieving, the best advice we have is to keep it simple.

- Listening is the best thing we can do for most griever.
- We can’t diminish the pain of this, so we shouldn’t try.
- When a bereaved person tells us how difficult this is, we should believe him or her and respond respectfully, without minimizing or distraction – not attempt to talk the person into “looking on the bright side” or pointing out that things could be worse.
- Offer specific kinds of assistance that we’re good at and willing to provide.

Being supportive of the grieving person means being present to the experience the person is having, meeting them where they are and respecting their painful and difficult reality. A griever finds comfort receiving support from others. As a result, and with the passage of time, isolation and fear and pain loosen their grip and hope appears on the horizon.

Respect time and individual needs

It has been observed that nothing can get a wave to the shore any faster than it’s coming on its own. Adjusting to loss and recovering from deep grief is like that, having its own rhythm and time. When we support someone through their grief process, without advice or distraction or minimizing his or her experience, hope follows. With hope comes resolution and healing – all in good time.

Thank you for being interested in the best way to help someone you care about through their grief journey. Your willingness to be present will make all the difference.