

Practical Suggestions for Helping Grieving People

1. **Be present and honor their feelings and their process.** We live in a "grief avoidant culture" that can often rob individuals of their grief. As such, often a simple, quiet, loving presence can be incredibly supportive to grieving people.
2. **Remember that grief is unique.** Everyone grieves differently. Let go of any expectations about what another's grief process "should" look like. Suspend judgment.
3. **Be aware of and respect differences within the family.** Understand that different family members may be experiencing their grief differently and may have different needs. While one family member may wish to talk and/or be around others, another family member may need time alone or quiet.
4. **Realize and accept that grief takes time.** Our culture places a great premium upon efficiency and quick remedies. Grief, however, operates outside of this value system; and no specific timetable can be attached to such a process. Avoid attempting to "rush the process" or "move things along" for those who are grieving.
5. **Hold reasonable expectations for grieving people.** Although grief changes over time, it is a life-long process. Don't expect that things will be, or should be, "back to normal" in a few weeks or even months. Again, grief takes time.
6. **Allow the expression of all types of feelings** including: sadness, despair, anger, fear, insecurity, confusion, guilt, anxiety, happiness and/or relief. Remember that feelings can and do change; and they may change quickly or unexpectedly for those who are grieving. As well, grieving people may experience many different - and seemingly divergent - feelings simultaneously. (Examples: despair, confusion, and excitement; or sadness and relief; or anger, helplessness, and happiness).
7. **Listen.** While this certainly necessitates being quiet and attentive to the grieving person, listening is also an active skill. Eye contact, nods of the head, and few - but wisely chosen - opportunities to reflect back what the person is thinking and/or feeling can be incredibly compassionate and supportive. Comments such as "You sound really concerned about your children" or "You said you feel relieved today," or "You mentioned that your sister has been very helpful" show the grieving person that you are genuinely connecting with them.
8. **In terms of what to say, the old adage "less is more" often applies.** Avoid the temptation to "make things better," to encourage grievers to "be strong," or to reassure grievers that "everything will be all right." While often well-meant, these comments and behaviors can actually deny grieving people important aspects of their grief journey. Instead, comments such as "I'm so very sorry for your loss," or "I cannot imagine how difficult this must be for you right now," or "I'm available to listen if/when you'd like" tend to respect the person's process and demonstrate your authentic concern for their feelings.
9. **If you are comfortable doing so, share loving memories of the deceased person if you have them.** Often a "code of silence" happens after a death and the deceased person is not spoken of. That can sometimes be stifling and oppressive for those who are grieving. Saying things like "Jim had an amazing sense of humor" or "Ann always made me feel welcome in her home" or "Your father really enjoyed watching football" can help to keep memories of the person alive for those who are grieving.

(Continued to next page)

10. **Allow silence.** Even if it feels awkward. There is often much activity and commotion for the newly grieving. As such, the gift of silence may be very much welcomed.
"A well-timed silence hath more eloquence than speech." (Martin Farquhar Tucker, 19th century British poet and writer.)
11. **Drop off practical items** such as paper plates, cups, napkins, as well as trash bags and cleaning supplies. Oftentimes there is much company at the homes of newly grieving people, and having such practical items ready at hand can be incredibly helpful.
12. **Offer to assist with day-to-day matters** such as: babysitting, walking the dog, picking up dry cleaning, running small errands, preparing a meal, or driving kids to and from sports practices, music lessons or other appointments. Make the offer, rather than waiting for the grieving person to identify their need, i.e., "Would you like me to take Mary to soccer practice on Tuesday?"
13. **Provide options.** Often grieving people feel as if so much is out of their control. Sometimes even offering simple choices regarding things that may seem inconsequential can actually be comforting. Examples: "Would you like this in the living room or the kitchen," "What would you like to do first," "May I help you with the laundry or the dishes?" Grieving individuals will usually let you know if they are too tired or overwhelmed to make even these decisions or if they want you to decide for them.
14. **Accept "no" as an appropriate response.** Understand that grieving people may wish to be left alone sometimes or may wish to do certain things for themselves. Be willing to accept this and don't force your presence or assistance; simply let the grieving person know that you are willing to assist if/when they are ready.
15. **Be aware of anniversaries, birthdays, holidays and important rites of passage.** These times may be especially difficult for those who are grieving. Let them know that you are thinking of them. Sending a thoughtful card or email, or making a friendly phone call or visit at these times - even years after the loss - can show your on-going support.