

What to Say, What to Do:

Suggested Ways to Support Someone Who is Grieving

Instead of saying...

"I'm sorry."

This can be perceived as impersonal or inappropriate to the griever. They may respond with "What are you sorry about?"

"I know how you feel" or "I know exactly what you are going through; my dog died."

Saying this may cause the bereaved person to feel that you are devaluing their individual grief. Very early on, grievers don't want to hear about someone else's grief experience.

"You are looking so much better, are you feeling better yet?"

Grievers often resent being given the message that others need them to be all better.

"You're not grieving right. You should do it this way..."

Remember that there is no "right" way to grieve. Grief is personal and will be different for each person.

Instead of doing this...

Don't wait for the griever to call you to ask for what they need.

When someone is grieving, it can be difficult for them to recognize what they want or need and even more difficult to ask for help.

Don't get mad because the griever is forgetful or not giving you enough attention.

It is normal for someone who is grieving to forget things easily, even if this is uncharacteristic of their previous manner.

Don't force all of your new found ideas onto the griever.

Sometimes the person you are trying to help wants to be left alone. They may shut down if prodded too much.

Don't avoid talking about the person who died because it might upset the griever.

Not mentioning the person who died is likely to make the griever feel even more alone in their grief. They often ask "Am I the only one who remembers the person who died?"

Try saying...

"My condolences." or "I am so sorry to hear of the death of ____"

Saying this acknowledges the person's experience and gives them an opportunity to talk about the person who died or about how they are feeling.

"I can only begin to imagine what you are going through and how you are feeling."

This statement demonstrates that you are truly focusing on them and their unique process. Ask them what it is like for them. Don't assume that you know what they are feeling or thinking.

"I don't know what to say, but I am here. We can talk if you want or I can just be here with you."

Though it can sometimes feel uncomfortable to sit with someone in silence, it may be better than saying something that isn't helpful.

"Are there times of day that are harder or easier for you? What are some of the things that bring you comfort?"

There are a wide variety of physical, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses to grief. What is right for one person may not suit someone else.

Try doing this...

Do take the initiative and do something for them.

Offer to come over for a visit, bring them something to eat or take them out. If you see something that needs to be done, ask their permission and do it!

Do help the griever to remember important appointments, projects and events.

Grieving can be an all-consuming process. Compassion and patience are the key. A friendly reminder phone call or an offer to accompany them to an appointment may be very welcomed.

Do be attentive and respectful of the griever's feelings and wishes.

Being a good listener sometimes means holding back your opinions and supporting them where they are in their process.

Do mention their name and share your memories and wishes.

Even if the death was a long time ago, take a risk and mention the person. If you know that there is an important life-cycle event approaching, be aware that this may bring about a strong grief reaction. Your remembering can bring tremendous comfort.