

How To Help A Grieving Neighbor or Friend

A death has occurred in the life of a friend and we struggle to know what to do. We want to “say the right thing” and hope that in so doing we will be able to “take the pain away”. But that’s not reality when talking about grief. There are no “right words” and the pain cannot “go away”. We must experience it and travel through it, which is a difficult journey for both the mourner and their friends who watch.

Perhaps it is best if we first understand what grief is. Grief is a normal and natural response to loss whether it involves the death of a loved one, loss of a job, divorce, loss of a home through fire, an “F” on a report card, a move or any of the other losses we inevitably experience in life. Grief work involves accepting the loss, experiencing the pain of that loss, and creating a different bond or relationship with the person you have lost. While your father may not be physically present in your life, your relationship continues on different levels.

So how do we help a friend who is grieving a loss?

1. Give them permission to grieve. It is often said childbirth is the hardest work you will ever do. Perhaps physically, but emotionally, grief work is the hardest job you will ever do. However in our society, we often rush people through their grief. One of the greatest gifts you can give to a grieving friend is to sit silently by their side and listen to “the story”. For someone who is grieving, the need to tell the story of what happened is intense and very healing. Sitting silently does not mean listening without interest, but it does mean listening without rushing them through the story that you have heard before. The value in telling the story is not to inform you of something you need to know; the value is to the storyteller. In sharing the story, the storyteller affirms what has happened and gives voice to their emotions.
2. Accept their feelings. No feelings are wrong, they simply ARE. The feelings of grief can sometimes overwhelm the mourner. Feelings of anger, guilt, sadness, and loneliness can frighten us and the mourner and sometimes make them wonder if they are going crazy. One of the important messages to convey is that these feelings are normal and that they are not alone in their experience. Remind them of your support and willingness to share their feelings.
3. Encourage them to accept help from others. They don’t need to do this alone. We pride ourselves in this culture to be self-sufficient, but remind them that we all need help from time to time and this is so true at a time of loss.
4. Do something. Mow the lawn, shovel the walk, and bring over a meal. Broad offers of help and suggestions to “call me if you need anything” are difficult for the mourner. Remember that they are flooded with emotions and real practical things to be done. Their ability to prioritize and reach out may be stretched to its limit. Instead of a broad offer of help, a better approach is to offer a specific errand or task that you can do. Instead of saying, “Call me if you need anything”, say “I’d like to bring supper over, would tonight work for your family?”
5. Encourage them to pray, talk to the person who has died, verbalize their feelings. Writing letters to the deceased, writing in journals, visiting the grave are all ways in which we allow our feelings to have a voice and that voice is healing to our grief process.
6. Don’t worry about saying the right thing. There is no magic answer or words. You can’t take the pain away or keep them from suffering. But you can

keep them from suffering alone. Ira Byock, M.D. author of *Dying Well*, states that 80% is just showing up. Show up and worry not about yourself.

7. Listen without judgement. Remember that every loss is unique and the experience is based on a variety of factors. Who died, how, what was the relationship with the deceased, religious and cultural background, sex, other stresses or crises in the mourner's life – all of these factors will influence the grief experience, many of which may be unknown to you. Listen without judgement and criticism. No one needs a critic, we all need a cheerleader.
8. Avoid cliches. The intent of most cliches is to suppress the grief response. Big boys don't cry, It was God's will, and others do not encourage people to continue voicing their feelings. Without a voice, grief work is delayed. Instead, offer reality. If you feel helpless, admit you don't have the answers. "I'm not sure what to say or do, but I want you to know that I am here and I care about you."
9. Encourage reminiscence. Sharing stories and memories is very healing and encourages the grief process.
10. Remember the value of presence. You may leave the house of a friend feeling like you said and did very little. But your presence spoke volumes. Remember – BE THERE.

Each of our offices has resources on end-of-life issues available for the public on a loan basis. For more information about grief and loss, visit our website www.hrrv.org or call us at (800) 237-4629.