



The Community Hospice Grief Center

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When Someone You Know Is Grieving

Many people are unsure how to help someone who is grieving the death of a loved one. If someone you know has experienced a significant loss, you are probably seeing some changes in his or her mood and behavior. The grief may seem overwhelming. You may be looking for a better understanding about grief, normal grieving reactions, and specific strategies for helping.

Normal Grief and Grief Reactions

Grieving is the natural response to loss. It is not about “getting over” the death; it is about expressing sorrow, sharing memories, and learning how to go forward with life. Over time, the person who is grieving learns to create a new reality without their loved one in it, but this is not the same as “getting over” the death. It is important for most grieving people to continue to commemorate their relationship with the deceased in some meaningful way. Sometimes it may be important for survivors to come to terms with difficult parts of their relationship and to find a way to make peace.

Grieving takes time. The person you know who is grieving may take many months, often well over a year, to gain a sense of having a new normal life. Grief is a form of healing. You would not push a friend to hurry up and walk if his leg was broken. In the same way, understand that a part of the griever is broken and needs time to heal.

Grief is not a mental illness, but it is a time of strong physical, emotional, mental and spiritual changes. Many grieving people experience disruption in their moods, thoughts, concentration and energy. Most people have some changes in their eating and sleeping habits. Each person is unique, and so is each person’s grief. Some people will become more irritable and angry, some may cry frequently, others may become quiet and withdrawn. Most people are exhausted by grief, and may become absentminded and distracted. All of these reactions are normal, and to be expected.

You Can Help

Call. It is normal for grieving people to be somewhat inwardly focused, making it difficult to express their needs. Rather than say, “Call if you need anything,” you should make the call. Not just once, but periodically over time, call and check in. Don’t offer help you can’t actually provide, and make sure to follow through on any help they accept.

Be specific. Are you running errands? Offer to pick something up or take care of some chore. If the person is a coworker, can you help make it easier for them to function during the distractible grieving period? Can you offer to take over a task or relieve one burden? This strategy is useful for the first several months.

Listen. Just listening to the stories grieving people want to tell is enormously helpful. They may need to talk about the death itself to help them figure out how to make sense of an overwhelming experience. They may express great sadness or anger. Do not take their emotions personally. Let them express them and just listen. You do not have to try to fix the feelings or problems that the griever is sharing, just be there. Avoid clichés, as these often make the griever feel you are trying to shut them up or aren't really listening.

Be available over time. Often after a death, people are supportive for the first few weeks. Many grieving people report that their support system rallies well at the time of the death but then vanishes two or three months later – long before their grieving is over. If you can, be there for the long haul. Judge your own capacity for helping, and make it clear what you can do. You do not have to feel guilty about the limits of your helping. Give what time you can give with an open heart, and trust that by not burning out you can give more over time.

Normalize. The grieving person may be overwhelmed by reactions to the loss. Letting the person who is grieving know that you understand these reactions are normal responses to a difficult circumstance may provide needed comfort and relief.

Encourage healthful living. Gently encourage the grieving person to try to get some rest, eat well, and exercise. Understand that the griever will probably have some changes in eating and sleeping patterns. A wonderful way to help the griever is to go for a walk together. This lets the griever get some exercise and talk about whatever is on his or her mind at the same time.

When Professional Help Is Needed

Most grief reactions will lessen over time. There are times however when grieving becomes complicated and counseling may be helpful. The following circumstances may indicate a need for professional assistance:

- If a grieving person has a history of mental illness
- If a grieving person is turning to drugs or alcohol, or has had problems with drugs or alcohol in the past
- If a grieving person has a limited support network
- If a grieving person is taking unusual and/or dangerous risks
- If grieving is causing significant daily problems for the griever
- If the grief is complicated by trauma (the death was difficult, sudden, or unexpected, or due to violence or suicide)
- If a griever expresses a desire to join their loved one in death. These thoughts are common and are rarely truly suicidal. However, if the griever speaks of actual plans about when and how to take their life, immediate evaluation by a doctor or mental health professional is required.