

How To Help a Grieving Person

We've all heard or witnessed people with the best of intentions doing or saying something that doesn't seem very helpful. Sometimes it is easy to recognize what NOT TO DO or say but then to wonder what TO DO or say. These guidelines are designed to help you know how to help as well as things to avoid doing or saying.

TRY TO . . .	BUT TRY TO AVOID . . .
<p>Be a good listener. Expect the person to repeat his/her story over and over. Reviewing the final days, death, and funeral and sharing memories are part of the process of grieving. Try saying:</p> <p><i>Tell me about . . .</i> <i>I'd like to see that picture of . . .</i></p>	<p>Telling your own story. Our stories are an important part of our own journey but the supporter's focus is on the loss of another and telling our own stories detracts from the very personal nature of the other person's grief. Try not to say:</p> <p><i>I know how you feel because when my (father, mother, husband) died, I...</i></p>
<p>Say the deceased's name. Try mentioning the name early in the conversation. It's okay to say:</p> <p><i>When (Sam, Judy, your mom) died . . .</i></p>	<p>Staying away from conversations that include the person's name or words like died, death, and funeral.</p>
<p>Be comfortable in the presence (or absence) of crying, anger, or other emotions. Try saying:</p> <p><i>It's okay to cry. (and offer a tissue)</i> <i>It's okay to be angry about . . . right now.</i> <i>There may be a time when you cry, but it's okay if you don't.</i></p> <p>You might inquire as to whether that person has typically cried in the past if they say they "can't" cry.</p>	<p>Telling the person not to cry, be angry, be depressed. It is often our own needs or discomfort around certain feelings rather than the needs of the bereaved that lead to statements like:</p> <p><i>Don't cry.</i> <i>Don't be angry.</i> <i>You need to cry.</i></p> <p>Don't change the subject when a person begins to cry. Instead, be a witness to their tears, sitting quietly and offering gentle support.</p>
<p>Honor that individual's timeline for grieving. Try saying:</p> <p><i>(Your daughter, neighbor . . .) has probably heard that grief takes a year and that's why she said that, but everyone does this on their own schedule.</i></p>	<p>Setting up a schedule for grief and the processes that follow a loss. Everyone grieves in their own way and on their own schedule. So, avoid statements like:</p> <p><i>It has only been six months; it takes a year.</i> <i>It's time to go through your wife's things.</i></p>
<p>Give the bereaved permission to grieve in his/her own way. Try saying:</p> <p><i>There is no right or wrong way to grieve.</i> <i>Everyone does this in their own way.</i></p>	<p>Telling the bereaved how to grieve. There is no right or wrong way to deal with the deceased's possessions. Look for discussion of how or when the bereaved will work on this rather than setting up a time or way for it to be done. If specific assistance is sought, e.g. <i>I don't know what to do with my husband's things</i>, you might offer suggestions. Similarly, there is no right or wrong way to visit the cemetery, celebrate holidays...</p>
<p>Remember that many people feel the loss occurred too soon. Even when a person lives a very long life or a couple is married for many years, people often wish it could have been longer. Try saying:</p> <p><i>...It doesn't matter if (he/she lived to be 90, you were married 60 years), you miss him/her just as much now that he/she is gone.</i></p>	<p>Interpreting the loss in terms of the person's long life, the couple's long marriage, or other family circumstances. Avoid statements like:</p> <p><i>...At least you had 50 years together.</i> <i>...You're lucky you . . .</i> <i>... had your mom until she was 90.</i> <i>... still have your father.</i> <i>... have a new baby to think about.</i> <i>... can have more children.</i></p>

<p>Help the bereaved interpret the loss in his/her own religious or philosophical framework. Bereaved persons may be angry with God or find comfort in religion depending on their own belief system and the circumstances of the loss. Try saying: <i>...It's okay to be angry with God.</i> <i>...Your faith seems to bring you great comfort.</i> They may ask "WHY?" You might respond: <i>...I don't know why (he got cancer . . .)</i> <i>...Some things just don't seem to have answers.</i> They may have some guilt feelings. You might try saying: <i>...that sounds like a really hard issue for you. I bet you did the best at the time (with what you knew, with the resources you had . . .)</i></p>	<p>Interpreting the loss in religious or philosophical terms. Avoid statements like: <i>He's in a better place.</i> <i>It's God's will.</i> <i>You will see him again in heaven.</i> Try not to offer explanations for questions which really don't have answers. We usually don't have any better answers to "Why?" than the person who is asking and he/she probably already heard the standard answers. Guilt can be difficult to resolve. If a person knew how not to feel (guilty, angry, depressed . . .) he/she wouldn't feel that way so it's not usually helpful to say: <i>Don't feel (guilty, angry, depressed . . .)</i></p>
<p>Encourage the bereaved to take the time to grieve rather than running away from the grief. Try saying: <i>...Most people find it helpful to wait before making those big decisions so they don't make a choice that is hard to undo later.</i> <i>...A vacation sounds like a nice change of scenery but allowing time to deal with your loss is important too.</i></p>	<p>Supporting avoidance or flight through moving, taking vacations, remarriage, or other significant changes. If a person makes significant changes too early, he/she may feel stripped of stable roots and the security of familiar surroundings. Such changes can rob the person of the very essential need to grieve the loss he/she has experienced, possibly causing later difficulties.</p>
<p>Listen for the positive and reinforce it. Statements about what the person did well, the good aspects of a relationship, can bring comfort. Try saying: <i>...It sounds like (your mom . . .) was really lucky that (you, your family) stood by her through this.</i> <i>...It sounds like your (dad, husband...) was a really special person.</i> <i>...It's a tribute to (your son, wife...) that you feel that way.</i></p>	<p>Focusing on just the difficult aspects of the loss or relationship. At times bereaved can zero in on all of the things that weren't as they would have wished. Listening for what went well or what was good about the relationship and gently rephrasing and repeating these is a way to offer solace and reframe the situation more positively.</p>
<p>Offer hope. Try saying: <i>...It's hard for you to deal with (your wife's) things right now, but you will find a time.</i> <i>...I imagine it might seem like you will never feel any better, but gradually the pain won't be quite as sharp or quite as constant.</i> ... (Your husband, your mother) will always be part of your life, but you will begin to be able to focus more on other things in awhile.</p>	<p>Fostering expectations that "Everything will be okay." Loss of a significant person in our lives changes us forever. Our relationship with that person is transformed to one of memory, but it does not end. We are not exactly the same and our world is not the same when we experience such a loss. Nonetheless, we will be able to go on with life, weaving into the tapestry of our days new meaning found in the loss of our loved one.</p>
<p>Seek help from professionals when you feel uncomfortable with how the bereaved is doing. ANY discussion of wanting to end life merits an immediate call to appropriate community resources so that they can sort out the seriousness of the situation.</p>	<p>Trying to handle uncomfortable situations on your own.</p>