

How to Help With Grief

Grief is a process. The person grieving goes through a number of stages sometimes in sequential order. Generally, people experience disbelief followed by anger, sadness, and eventually recovery. But moving through those stages is not simple, and from time to time there is motion back and forth between stages.

It is normal that one progresses through these stages of grieving. Unresolved grief can lead to physical or mental problems.

One may move into recovery so gradually that it seems there are no changes, no improvements until a time one realizes that s/he is smiling or laughing and that they have experienced a period during which they did not think about their loss.



The length of time grieving will vary from person to person. It is not uncommon for people who lose someone to spend over a year in the process.

During the initial period of shock and disbelief, the bereaved may walk around appearing to be very controlled and capable. Their minds have not yet fully comprehended their loss, and although they make arrangements and talk about their loss, they often tell us afterward that they have virtually no memory of that period.

It is the time when the bereaved are surrounded by friends and family and may keep busy to fill their days. For us, who care about them, the best thing we can do usually is to help with some of the tasks that need doing, so that they don't get so totally worn down. We may provide food, make calls, answer the door, etc. Also we will want to express our caring about their pain. A simple statement of "I care about you" or "I'm sorry" is enough. Maybe we'll just give a hug or take their hand. Maybe we'll cry together. Many times friends think they need to say something profound, but that is not necessary and may not even

be remembered when the bereaved emerges from numbness.

The bereaved may ask "Why?" No one knows, and it's okay to say, "I don't know." Generally at this stage, the grieving are not comforted by being told it is God's will. That comment may help friends, and later the bereaved may reach that conclusion, but it won't help to rush them to that idea..

During the anger stage, the person we care about may seem to have disappeared. They may be moody and unpleasantly angry. They may rage at God, doctors, family members, anyone. They may withdraw or be very busy taking care of all the business that is left: getting rid of clothes, other belongings, filing papers, etc. Especially during this stage, people may feel that no one else has ever experienced a loss like theirs. It feels overwhelming. The same statement of "I care about you and your pain" will probably be better received than "I know how you feel."

How to help in the following weeks

Bereaved people need a chance to work through their grief, maybe by talking, yelling, crying, or whatever. They will want to talk about the person who died, and they may need to tell us about the death or other stories more than one time. They need us to be patient, to reassure them that they are doing what they need to do, and to share memories. It doesn't feel good to think the person who died just disappeared, to be rushed to return to normalcy, or to get over grief. If they feel guilty, we might reassure them that they did the best they knew how to do, or that we don't think they're guilty.

It can be helpful to do practical things like errands or picking up groceries. We need to reach out, to extend invitations, because usually during this period, people are not comfortable in asking for help. The other people who were close to the deceased will not have much energy for helping our friend and/or they may not be nearby. We can say, "Let me know if you need anything", and we may be very sincere.

But when people are deeply hurt, they isolate themselves. It's not a time when it will be easy for them to ask for help.

Sadness and loss of life style

The next period is one of sadness. Generally this is the longest stage because the bereaved must disconnect from the one they lost, and there are a myriad of connections. Some will be trivial: hearing music they liked, a particular memory, seeing their favorite food at the grocery store. Other links are huge and involve major life changes for those who are left. Can the bereaved care for their home by themselves? Will they need to relocate in order to have support? Will they have enough income to maintain their standard of living?



One of the huge losses after a death may be the group of friends with whom the bereaved spent time. To a newly-widowed spouse, being single is often a difficult position—being the third wheel, the extra, the odd one. If one loses a young child, s/he may not want to see other kids playing. The bereaved may have been the link to a group or an activity that ends with their loss.

This is a period during which people may talk about not going on. Their sadness robs them of energy. It is not uncommon to do just what has to be done and then collapse, not necessarily to sleep but to be absorbed in the loss. They may sleep more or less, eat more or less, and not be able to concentrate. This is also a period during which people may experience a lot of sickness. Without positive energy, the body is more vulnerable to germs and viruses.

If people are suicidal, they are not thinking clearly and may need extra help to get counseling. We can tell them that we would be very sad to lose them. Also we may strongly remind them that their children or others may need them.

Again, the bereaved need to be approached and included in activities when possible. Especially at first, they may not be able to stay out long. It takes a great deal of energy to maintain one's composure. Until they feel less likely to cry, they may need to retreat after short intervals in public. Some time periods — like evenings, weekends, or holidays, and special events, like birthdays — are usually especially difficult.

If the grieving goes without too much trouble, the bereaved will gradually deal with the multiple adjustments they are forced to make. They will determine how to structure their day without the one they lost. They may develop new hobbies or activities with people who were not so much a part of their lives previously. They will establish a direction for their future that may or may not include a remembrance or a cause related to the one who died. They may establish a new type of connection even with you, their friend. They have to find a new way.

Finding a new way

It is good, if possible, to postpone making major decisions until one is well through the process of grieving. One's outlook changes dramatically from one stage to another. While life will never be the same again, the bereaved may want to keep some things they had before; for example, they may want to stay in their own home. As a friend, you may help them to be patient until they are ready to make such decisions.

During normal grieving or when grieving is more complicated, counseling may help people to move through the stages. Sometimes a support group helps because the other members are going through the same stages. They too may need new friends or be awake in the middle of the night for talking. They may inspire someone to take a hard step that seemed overwhelming when first considered. Or they might

help the bereaved feel grateful, realizing that what happened to them could have been much worse.

A local hospice, church, or mental health association may know of local support groups that may be helpful. You might check out such groups for a friend who doesn't yet have the energy to find them. Compassionate Friends offers support to those who have lost a child of any age. Their web site is <http://www.compassionatefriends.org/>

How to help children with grief

Children need special attention. The adults in their lives may not have much energy for dealing with them because of being caught up in their own grief. Also children may have misinformation or misconceptions about death, about what happened, or about their roles or responsibilities in the death. It is fine for them to see others grieving and to know that it is okay to cry and be angry. Many times children run around and are very active because they don't know what else to do with the uncertainty and anxiety they feel. An adult they trust may be able to help them create a picture, a story, or an activity that may help them with their grieving.



For adults, drugs and alcohol are a concern. While they may temporarily dull the pain, they also delay movement through the stages of grieving. Medication, too, can be a problem. It should only be taken under the supervision of a physician. Exercise and journal-writing may be helpful. Good nutrition and not too much caffeine may aid sleeping and feeling better.

Staying involved, offering encouragement and appropriate praise, and continuing to care will mean a lot to the bereaved. Letting them know you're thinking about them will be comforting.

When Someone You Care About Is Grieving

Understanding the Process and What Might Help

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