



Supporting a grieving loved one

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On Friday it was the 25th anniversary of 9/11 – a series of coordinated suicide plane attacks in the USA that killed 2 977 people. Unfortunately, there have been plenty of other suicide attacks and bombings as well throughout the world that have resulted in huge loss of human life. And in all these cases there are families and friends, colleagues and other loved one's who sit with the shock and horror and pain of the loss. We will all experience grief when we lose someone we love. And we will all encounter friends, colleagues, relatives, and even strangers, who have lost someone they love and are grieving. Despite the frequency of such an event, people do not automatically know how to deal with a grieving person. Those who have not encountered a lot of grieving people, those who have little experience with grief themselves, and those who struggle with their own and others' emotions, can also feel overwhelmed and at a loss as to the best way to respond.

Grieving is a painful experience, although it is also a very human experience. People don't enjoy experiencing grief themselves or watching others experience grief, and are often nervous of interacting with someone grieving deeply. Most fairly sensitive people want to be a help to someone who is grieving and can struggle with knowing how best to approach such a person, and what to say and do so they do not make things worse. Below are some do's and don'ts's when interacting with someone who is grieving. These are general guidelines and if you know someone well and know what they want and need, you can adapt and add as appropriate.

What you want to do:

1. When speaking to a grieving person keep your words simple and sincere. "I am so sorry", or "I am so sorry for your loss", works in most instances. Don't feel you have to talk a lot. Often the most comforting experience is someone's presence and not what they say. But be genuine. When we are grieving, we can be quite sensitive to anything that is fake or contrived.
2. Show you care even if you are shocked yourself and at a loss for what to say. "I don't know what to say, but I am here for you." "I don't have the right words to express sadness at your loss, but I care about you and what you are going through".
3. Allow the grieving person to express their grief. Sit next to them and let them cry, or rage, or even just be numb and shocked. Don't tell them to stop crying or "snap out of it".
4. Take specific actions to help them. When you ask a grieving person what help they would like, they will often say "nothing" because they fear being a burden or because they are in shock and cannot think of what they need right now. Rather be proactive and do things like dropping

off dinner, or going shopping for them, or helping them clean the house. Don't rely on them to ask for help. Step in of your own accord.

5. Validate their feelings. What they are going through is real for them. There is no set exact way to go through the grieving process. You can tell them, "It is okay for you to feel like that".
6. Listen and let the person talk.
7. Be there in the long run. Often after a loss people gather around to support the grieving individual. Then after two weeks the calls and visits stop. But the grief doesn't. So, keep the support going for some time.

What you do not want to do

1. Do not use phrases that minimise their pain. Saying something like, "it could have been worse is not helpful". "It happens to all of us at some time or another", is another unhelpful and inconsiderate response. In fact, don't use cliches as this mostly goes against the principle of simple and sincere. And do not make any jokes about the situation. This is not the time to bring out your inner comedian.
2. Avoid using "at least..... statements" such as "at least they had a good life". That suggests that the loss is not that bad and they should experience less pain than they do. There is no "at least" when it comes to loss. It is always, no matter what other people think, incredibly painful for the person experiencing the loss.
3. Don't make it about yourself. I have seen people, when talking to someone who just lost a spouse to cancer, talk about their own experiences and people they knew who went through the same thing. "My mother went through the same thing.....". Nobody goes through the same thing and at this time, no one wants to hear about your mother. Grieving is unique to each person grieving. Pain is unique to each person experiencing pain. You have no idea what the person is going through.
4. Another common cliché to avoid is, "Everything happens for a reason". Avoid assuming the beliefs of another person. Apart from being insensitive, the grieving person may not believe that statement at all. Don't try and justify the loss and don't try and make it out to be anything other than a terrible experience.
5. Do not say to someone, "I know exactly how you feel". It is not helpful and it is not true. Even if you may have had a similar loss, you do not know what someone is going through. And if you have not been through a similar experience then definitely do not pretend you know how the grieving person is feeling.
6. Grieving is a process and it is important for the mental health of a person that they be allowed to grieve and go through the process to a point of accepting the loss. Saying to someone words like, "You need to move on", are mostly inappropriate especially if the loss is recent.
7. Do not tell them how they should feel or put a time limit on their grief. "You should be over this by now", is invalidating how they feel and how they experience grief. And anyway, you are probably not an expert in how to deal with grief.

Although grieving is a universal experience in that we all grieve losses at various times in our lives, it is also a unique experience. Mostly healthy people will grieve and move through it. But they will have their own way of doing so. Most of us don't like experiencing grief or watching others experience it (well I hope so, because enjoying someone grieving is somewhat psychopathic). If you are not sure how to help someone get through grief take your cue from them. Do they just need someone to sit next to them? Do they want someone to hold their hand? Do they need to express their feelings? Do

they want to be left alone? Probably the most helpful thing you can do is honour their present needs and respect their wishes.

Grief is a normal emotion. People usually cycle through stages of sadness and anger among other feelings. Grief does gradually become less intense, although some losses you never quite get over. If someone who is grieving seems to never come out of it (and I mean years) or they are really lethargic and isolated and don't seem to express any interest in anything in life, then consider that what was grief may have gone into depression. Depression is not a normal state. It is an illness that needs to be treated. And persistent grief that does not lessen over time may be a warning sign to seek professional help.