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# Helping Others Cope With Grief

## Helping Other Adults

In our relationships, we can also be called upon to support others who are grieving a loss. This can be awkward. Many people are unsure what to say or do to be helpful. They worry that they will inadvertently cause additional problems for grieving people by saying or doing the wrong thing. Grief is an individual thing; there really is no set formula for how best to be of service to grieving people. There are, fortunately, principles that can be followed that are most always appropriate.

- **Reaching Out** – Many people are hesitant to reach out to those who are grieving and instead choose to wait for the grieving person to ask for assistance. However, the griever may be dealing with so much that he or she is unable to let others know that help is needed. He or she may be ashamed or embarrassed to not be handling everything well on his or her own. Having a family member or friend offer support or encouragement can be very welcome and much needed. Help should be offered in the form of specific tasks that the griever may need assistance with, rather than a general "call if you need anything". Grievers are often overwhelmed and not thinking straight, and so may not be able to say what it is they need help with. Would-be helpers can be of greatest service by trying to anticipate what the grieving person needs done, and offering specifically to do those things. Offering to cook, run errands, pick up groceries, clean the house, take care of a pet, etc. are all good examples of specifically helpful things that can be offered.
- **Don't Minimize the Loss** – Often people are unsure what to say to those who are grieving. While wanting to make the grieving person feel better, they may actually accomplish the opposite by minimizing the loss, or insinuating that he or she is not behaving as others expect. Avoid using phrases like, "She led a long life and it was her time", "It was God's plan for him to leave now", "Time heals all wounds", and "She was in such pain, it was probably for the best". These phrases attempt to offer comfort by framing the loss in the context of religion or in terms of the larger perspective. Any attempts of this nature can seem like you are minimizing the fresh and overwhelming loss. Such phrases can easily come off the wrong way, leaving the grieving person angry and feeling that you are insensitive or afraid. The best types of comments to make avoid any attempt to frame the loss, and instead, simply comment on the difficult situation, how sorry you are that the loss had to occur, and whether or not you can be of support or help to the grieving person. A heartfelt and simple, "I'm so sorry for your loss", works quite well.
- **Listen** – Instead of trying to offer "helpful" comments that run the risk of minimizing the grieving person's experience, you can offer genuine assistance by simply being present and listening to what the grieving person has to say. Many grievers simply need someone to be there to listen to them and allow them to vent their overwhelming emotions. They are likely to need to be heard and witnessed, rather than to have someone try to make them feel better.
- **Don't be Afraid to Mention the Lost Person, Place or Thing** – Often people may fear that if they use the deceased person's name or refer to the loss, they may make the griever feel worse. However, many grievers feel better if those around them are not acting as though the person or relationship never existed and that nothing has changed. Acknowledging the loss is frequently beneficial to the grieving process. A corollary bit of advice that goes along with not being afraid to mention names, is to not baby the grieving person, but instead treat them normally. The griever needs to see that others are interacting with them as they always have and not treating them with extra-gentle "kid gloves".
- **Suggest Professional Help** – If it becomes clear that a griever is getting stuck in their grieving process, experiencing difficulty processing their loss or having troubling physical symptoms,

family members or friends should suggest that the grieving person see a therapist or a medical doctor so as to gain assistance in dealing with their grief.

## **Helping Children**

Coping with a death or other significant loss can be difficult for the strongest of adults. It can be even more difficult and confusing for children. Here are a few ways to assist a child during grief.

**Tell the Child What Has Happened.** It is important to communicate openly and honestly with children about what has happened. When a death has occurred, many people try to soften the blow by using euphemistic phrases such as "He's gone to sleep" or "She's gone away". Dodging the issue in this manner, however well intentioned, can result in further confusion. For example, telling a child that a loved one has "gone away" suggests that they had a choice in the matter, and that therefore other people may abandon the child too. Alternatively, the child might think that the loved one can come back again, which can only set them up for further disappointment. Creation of mistaken impressions such as these might create unnecessary fear or confusion for the child, rather than the comfort that was intended.

**Showing Some Vulnerability is Okay.** It is okay for children to see that adults are suffering as well as they are, and that the loss is difficult for anyone to get through, regardless of age and experience. It is important not feel as though you must have all the answers, or present yourself as invulnerable. At the same time, it is NOT okay for adults to lay the burden of their own grief onto children's shoulders, or to ask children, either explicitly or implicitly, to assist them in coping with their own grief. Making a child into a confidant in this manner is harmful to the child, in that children are not mature enough emotionally to handle that sort of pressure. Adults should be open with children about their own sadness or pain, but not expect or communicate to children that they should do something to make things better for the adults. It can be quite difficult for grieving adults to find the right balance between sharing enough with children to help them understand what has happened, and sharing too much (which can lead to coping problems for the children).