

Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Supporting Someone Through a Loss

It is often difficult to know what to say to someone who has lost a loved one. Often there are fears of saying the wrong thing. In fact, fear is a common response to loss. As well as causing us to avoid contact and limit conversation with the bereaved, it can cause grievers to isolate themselves from day-to-day contact and activities.

Typically, those who are grieving have a heightened awareness of what is going on around them and are very sensitive to changes in their relationships. Avoidance can increase their sense of isolation and their ability to receive comfort from those they trust. Sometimes, the bereaved may prefer to be alone, but they usually need those around them to treat them "normally."

Alternatives to Avoidance

Allow the bereaved individual to decide whether they wish to talk about it. When speaking with someone who has lost a loved one, something as simple as "I was sorry to hear of your loss" allows the griever to say "thank you" or to take the opportunity to talk about it. Give them the opportunity to make that decision. But when no one mentions the loss, the bereaved can feel isolated and unsupported. Trust yourself. You will know if they want to talk or not.

Support Goes Beyond Words

There are many practical and respectful ways of helping others who have experienced a loss. Keep in mind that your involvement will, in some part, be based on your existing relationship. To support effectively, it is important to manage your involvement and not become exhausted yourself.

Helping the Bereaved Immediately After the Death

The following are some ways to express your support for the recently bereaved. Your relationship with them will guide you to the suggestions that are comfortable for you.

- Offer to notify family/friends about funeral arrangements.
- House sit if the bereaved will be traveling for the service.
- Help answer the phone and greet visitors and keep a record of contacts.
- Track who has sent letters, flowers or has helped in any way.
- Help co-ordinate food and drinks for the service.
- Help arrange housing and transportation for out-of-town visitors.
- Keep the house cleaned and prepare some food.
- Offer your company when they are going to the funeral home.
- Arrange care and transportation for children.
- Allow the bereaved to be alone, if desired.
- Write a note of support or send flowers.
- Remind him/her to rest, eat and take care of themselves.
- Call on friends and neighbors for help as needed.

Helping the Bereaved After the Memorial Service

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Be sure not to be intrusive when offering support. Ask where your help is needed most. Here are some things you might suggest:

- Help out with the tasks that the deceased did in the home, such as car upkeep, cooking or bill paying.
- Offer to help with thank you notes.
- Offer transportation if necessary.
- Visit or contact your colleague or friend during difficult times like birthdays and holidays and acknowledge the anniversary of the death.
- Listen to the bereaved when they need to talk.

When someone has lost a partner or family member, they often feel that their life is no longer in their control. Be sensitive and let them tell you what will be helpful.

Unhelpful Comments and Helpful Alternatives

It can be hard to know the right thing to say in a time of loss. Try to avoid clichés and assumptions such as the following:

Try not to Say:	**Instead Say:**
I know just how you feel.	I am so sorry.
It is God's will.	I know this is very painful for you.
You can always have more children (or at least you have more children).	He/she was very special.
He/she had a very full life.	I know you will miss her/him.
It's time to move on with your life.	Take all the time you need.
Be strong.	This must be very hard.
Something good always comes out of tragedy… or… every cloud has a silver lining.	(Instead, just listen.)
They are better off.	We will all miss her/ him.

Call me if you need me.	I will call you tomorrow. In the meantime if you need me here is my number.

Even after some time has passed, try to avoid expressing unhelpful expectations such as "You should be over it by now." While their grief process may concern you, it is their process. Your job is to support and not direct their journey. Coping with grief takes the time that it takes, and some people never stop feeling the loss.

Your friend or colleague will also give you cues as to their philosophy regarding death and grief. Culture and religious beliefs play an important role in how individuals cope with illness and death. Remember to be sensitive to this, particularly if you don’t understand or share their beliefs.

If in doubt, be honest. Some of the best conversations and learning experiences may occur when you simply state "I don't know what to say." Your vulnerability will be genuine and will allow your friend to be honest with you without fear. Don’t underestimate the value of listening as a sign of support and caring. After all, there are as many ways to support a bereaved friend as there are ways of grieving.