

## How to Help Others in Grief

When a friend or family member has suffered the loss of someone or something dear to them, it is natural to want to help in some way. Many people feel unsure of what to do at such times. The following ideas will guide you in your efforts to offer help and support.

**1. Recognize that loss is significant.**

Experiencing a death, divorce or other major loss is a shattering event. Your friend's world has been turned upside down. It will take time and effort to find a new sense of normal.

**2. Offer compassion.** Compassion is the ability to listen without judgment. This means that you listen without a set of expectations about how your friend should act or feel. No matter how similar our experience, it is not the same and it is critical to allow our friend to experience grief in the way it comes to them. Compassion allows us to be a companion rather than lead the way.

**3. Understand the nature of grief.**

Having a good understanding of experiences that are common in grief will allow you to reassure your friend when their reactions are typical and know when to suggest professional help if appropriate. Follow this link for more information about the grief process.

**4. Don't take their grief away.** Our own discomfort with the pain of grief sometimes prompts us to hurry others by urging them to clean out possessions or move on with their life. It is

important not to minimize feelings of grief or expect others to progress on a set schedule. It takes patience and commitment to share the journey through grief with a friend or loved one.

**5. Provide a listening ear.** Being an active listener is the foundation of helping someone in grief. It is more important to focus on listening well than on what to say or do. A good guideline is to listen 80% of the time and talk only 20% of the time. Your friend may relate the same information about the loss several times. This repetition is part of the grieving process. Listen each time with the intention of understanding and caring. In addition, it's important to learn to be comfortable with shared silence when there are no words to say.

**6. Choose your words carefully.** In an effort to say something consoling, we often resort to standard clichés that can be very detrimental to someone in grief. Despite our best intentions, using clichés diminishes the suffering of the griever by offering a simplistic solution and suggesting that we do not really understand the painful reality of grief. Such clichés include: "She had a good, full life;" "Think of all you still have to be thankful for;" "Time will heal;" or "Just be happy he's not in pain anymore." Do mention the deceased person's name in sharing memories. It is reassuring to know they are not forgotten.

**7. Reach out to them.** Physical presence is very important. Your attendance at services of remembrance and brief visits



at the home will communicate your care and concern. Appropriate physical contact such as the squeeze of a hand, an arm around a shoulder or a hug can say a thousand words. Calling or writing if one cannot physically be there is important also.

**8. Remember special days.** Holidays, anniversaries and other special occasions are typically difficult times for someone adjusting to loss. These events emphasize the fact that life is no longer the same and may increase a sense of longing for what once was. Remembering these days with an invitation, a call or a card is a good way to express continued support.

**9. Offer practical, specific help.** Mourners often hear, "Call if you need anything," but are unlikely to have the strength or assertiveness to make such a call. It is better to take the initiative and offer specific help such as cleaning the house, grocery shopping, preparing food, washing clothes, doing errands or answering the phone; even suggesting the day and time we can help. Be sensitive to the griever's need for privacy as you help with the tasks of daily living.