



*Reach out,
establish contact,
and be there.*



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How to Help Someone Who Is Grieving

By Dr. Bill Webster

I'd love to help but I just don't know what to say or what I should do. I am sure many of us can identify with such sentiments. We hear that a friend or a neighbor has had a loss. Our hearts immediately go out to them and we long to be of some comfort or assistance but we just don't know what to do or what to say. Often because we are afraid or unable to raise the subject we may say nothing. To the grieving person it may seem as if there is little understanding or support.

Here are six practical suggestions as to how we can help in a positive and constructive way people who have a loss and support them in their time of need.

1. Be there.

Our initial reaction is often "What can I do?" and it is a wonderful one. Most of us want to do something to help take away the pain of loss. People will offer all kinds of practical help such as bringing in food, looking after children and many other examples. Yet often what is needed is for people to be, not just to do. As helpers we should take the initiative and make contact. Remember the griever is in shock and isn't functioning very well. They may not be able to respond to your sincere offers to "Let me know if there's anything I can do." They may not know what they need. The first thing is to reach out, establish contact and be there. Don't worry about what you're going to say or do. It may come as a surprise, but I actually remember very little of what was said to me at the funeral home. What I do remember is that certain people were there, and their presence made all the difference. Just be yourself. The gift of presence is most important to people in grief.

2. Please listen.

One of the healthy things in the days before a funeral is the opportunity for people to talk about the dead person and the events surrounding the death. Unfortunately, that process often ends shortly after the funeral service. Research has shown that the most significant factor in the failure of grief resolution is the absence or inappropriateness of social support. Put simply, people need to talk...which means others need to listen. In fact it is better to say people need to talk and talk and have repeated opportunities to review and relive the person's life and death. You may find they repeat the same story over and over. Encourage this. Difficult as it may be for the listener because each reliving of these events is another strand of the cord that is cut. Care enough to find out about the person's grief. Give them permission to talk with questions like: Can you tell me a little about the death? What happened? Tell me about him/her. How did you meet? What was he/she like? What has been happening since the death? How have you found things? How are you feeling? What are some of the struggles or challenges? Know when to close your mouth and when to open your ears. Simple listening skills such as maintaining eye contact, leaning forward and nodding your head can encourage the griever

Grief manifests itself in many different ways.



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to open up. The unspoken message is “You’re important and what you are saying is important, and I want to hear everything you’re telling me.”

3. Interpret “normal” behavior.

It is important to understand what grief is and how it manifests itself. Only then will we know what is normal. Grief is an emotional response to a significant loss. It manifests itself in many different ways, in greater or lesser degrees and in various combinations. In simple terms, grief is unpredictable. This is what makes normality so difficult to define or neatly package. What is normal? Why can two different people react to grief in completely different ways and both be considered normal? Our grief response is a unique blending of numerous emotions. Some of these include shock, disbelief, numbness, crying, confusion, anxiety, depression, guilt, anger, loneliness, despair, sadness, helplessness, frustration, irritability, resentment, fatigue, sleep disruptions, physical symptoms, and lowered self esteem. All these emotions are normal. People in grief, not understanding this emotional explosion they may be experiencing, often think they are going crazy. They aren’t! They are normal. They may need some help to work through all their feelings, but that’s OK. You may not be a doctor or a psychologist, but if you can help people to see they are normal in their feelings of grief, you will bring the best medicine. By the way, there are other messages in this series that will help you understand the grief process more fully.

4. Legitimize grief feelings.

I try never to say “I know how you feel” to anyone, because I don’t. How can I know how they feel? All I know is how I felt when grief touched my life. People say these words with good intentions, but the grieving person often does not appreciate them. To say I know how a person feels somehow minimizes their experience. The loss is unique to the griever. The feelings of grief are unique, influenced by many factors around the relationship and the circumstances. Sure, I lost my wife, and I remember how that felt...but someone else may be feeling something quite different, and we need to validate that. We need to let the person know it is OK to grieve. Grief is confusing to people for many reasons. It manifests itself in some seemingly unusual and uncharacteristic behaviors. The messages people sometimes get is that they should “be strong.” They may be looking for permission to grieve. They are asking us in hidden ways if it is safe to express to us what they are REALLY feeling. To tell a person NOT to cry when tears fill the eyes is to deny permission to grieve. To say that they must be strong, or that life must go on, or even to quickly change the subject to something more cheerful, gives the message that the grief and the feelings are not acceptable to us. Maybe we are simply saying we can’t handle it, which is fair enough. But if we do want to be a support, we need to assure them that we don’t mind if they cry, or rant and rave, or show anger, or display any of the emotions associated with grief. Let people know that you accept them as they are in this time...that you accept their weakness and vulnerability...that you are not trying to “fix” them or indicating they should be doing better. There is often a critical moment between friends when the voice cracks, the mouth quivers, and tears come to the eyes. In that moment, say little or nothing, but reach out, touch the person, perhaps by a gentle hand on the arm, and let them know that it is OK to let it go and express the grief that is being felt.

*Always remember
that grief takes
time.*

5. *Tolerate angry responses.*

Be prepared for the fact that you may be the focus of some angry reactions or outbursts. It is not necessarily a reflection on you or the things you are attempting to do. Don't get angry in return or give up on the person when this happens. The problem with anger is that it doesn't always get focused in the right direction. Grievers may be angry with doctors, ministers, funeral directors, friends...in fact almost anyone. And they are angry for one simple reason. We cannot give them what they want the most. Namely the return of the person they have lost. Something has happened that cannot be changed, much as we would like to. The feelings of helplessness around such a situation lead people to be angry. They are angry because they have been left. But where do they focus that anger. On whoever happens to be in the line of fire when the frustration overflows. We have to be clear here. The person is not angry at us, hard as it may be to be objective. We have to be realistic about the help we can offer. We cannot take the pain away from the person. Despite our best efforts, we cannot rectify the situation to their satisfaction. That does not mean we can do nothing...it just means we have to be realistic.

6. *Give the griever hope.*

While not minimizing the pain and difficulty of grief, we need to give the griever hope. Hope that someday the pain will subside. Hope that life will have meaning again. Hope that God has a purpose in all this, even though we may not see it right now. Hope that someday life will make sense again. Such a feeling of hope will bring comfort, the realization that things will get better, and that they will find the grace and the strength to carry on. This is why support groups can be so helpful. They show people whose loss is recent that others have survived the anguish and the agony and are finding new meanings for their life. While the newly bereaved may not feel it at the time, seeing that there is a possibility of recovery is a glimmer of hope at the end of the tunnel. Giving the mourner hope involves constantly reassuring them that as long as they work at it with courage, the pain will subside, and life will go on. It may be a reminder that strength is often made perfect in weakness. But the confidence we place in the person that they will make it will give them courage and confidence in times when self-doubts assail.

Always remember that *grief takes time*. Not everyone goes through the same process, and none at the identical pace. More often than not, grief takes much more time than society has realized or allowed. We have often forced unrealistic expectations on people who have had a loss. We expect them to be "over it in a relatively short time. While it is commonly accepted that the intense reactions of grief will subside within six to twelve months, it is also widely acknowledged that some things may take years to be resolved. It is up to the grieving person to set the pace for their own journey. We of their friends and family can only walk with them on that journey. We can't fix people or try to make their decisions for them, or try to set the pace for their journey. But we can be with them. We can walk alongside and let them know they are not alone. They have a friend, and they will be thankful for that and for us. We will have made a difference in someone's life.

And, after all, that is the greatest reward. ■



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