

When a friend loses a loved one through death, we struggle to know what to do. We want to say the right thing, and hope that in so doing, we will be able to “take the pain away.” However, that’s not reality with grief. There are no “right words,” and the pain cannot “go away.” People must experience and travel through grief, which is a difficult journey for both the grieving person and his or her friends who watch.

First, we must understand that grief is a normal and natural response to loss, whether it involves the death of a loved one, job loss, divorce, loss of a home, a move or any of the other losses we inevitably experience in life.

Working through grief involves accepting the loss, experiencing the pain of that loss, and creating a different bond or relationship with the person you have lost. For example, while your father may not be physically present in your life, your relationship continues on different levels.

How to Help a Friend Who is Grieving

- Give your friend permission to grieve. Emotionally, grief work is the hardest work you will ever do. In our society, we often rush people through their grief.

One of the greatest gifts you can give to a grieving friend is to sit silently by his or her side and listen to “the story.” For someone who is grieving, the need to tell the story of what happened is intense and very healing. Sitting silently does not mean listening without interest, but it does mean listening without rushing the person through a story you may have already heard.


The value in telling the story is not to inform the listener of something; the value is to the storyteller. In sharing the story, the storyteller affirms what has happened and gives voice to his or her emotions.

- Accept the person’s feelings. No feelings are wrong, they simply are. Feelings of grief can sometimes overwhelm the person. Feelings of anger, guilt, sadness and loneliness can frighten both you and the grieving person, and sometimes makes grieving people wonder if they are going crazy.

One of the important messages to convey is that these feelings are normal, and that the person is not alone in his or her experience. Remind the grieving person of your support and willingness to listen to his or her feelings.

- Encourage the person to accept help from others. He or she doesn’t need to do this alone. We pride ourselves in being self-sufficient, but remind the person that we all need help from time to time. This is especially true during a time of loss.
- Do something for the grieving friend. Mow the lawn, shovel the walk or bring over a meal. Instead of a broad offer of help, a better approach is to offer a specific errand or task you can do. Instead of saying, “call me if you need anything,” say “I’d like to bring a meal over, would tonight work for you?” Remember that the person is flooded with emotions and practical things to be done. His or her ability to prioritize and reach out may be stretched to the limit.
- Encourage the grieving person to pray, talk to the person who has died, and verbalize his or her feelings. Writing letters to the deceased, journaling or visiting the grave are all ways to allow feelings to have a voice. That voice is healing in the grief process.

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- Don't worry about saying the right thing. There are no magic answers or words. You can't take the pain away or keep the person from suffering. However, you can keep him or her from suffering alone. Ira Byock, M.D., author of the book "Dying Well," says that 80 percent is just showing up, so simply show up.
 - Listen without judgment. Remember that every loss is unique, and the experience is based on a variety of factors. Who died, how, what the relationship was with the deceased, religious and cultural background, gender, other stresses in the grieving person's life—all of these factors will influence the grief experience, and may be unknown to you. Listen without judgment and criticism. No one needs a critic; we all need a friend.
 - Avoid clichés. The intent of most clichés is to suppress the grief response. "Big boys don't cry" and "It was God's will" do not encourage people to continue voicing their feelings. Without a voice, grief work is delayed. Instead, offer reality. If you feel helpless, admit you don't have the answers, "I'm not sure what to say or do, but I want you to know that I am here and I care about you."
 - Encourage the person to reminisce. Sharing stories and memories is very healing, and encourages the grief process.
 - Remember the value of presence. You may leave the house of a friend feeling like you said and did very little, but your presence spoke volumes. Remember—be there.



Hospice of the Red River Valley has many resources available for the public, on a loan basis, through the resource libraries in each of our offices. Topics include caregiving, terminal illness, dying, death, grief and loss. For more information about grief and loss, visit our website: www.hrrv.org or call us at (800) 237-4629.