

# Helping Others After Tragedy Strikes: What to Say and Do

## WHAT CAN I SAY?

There are many ways in which families, friends and professionals in the field of bereavement can be supportive of those who are grieving. Several suggestions are listed below. Some I have learned through personal and professional experience; many have been gathered from the hundreds of experiences of those who have told me of the support they wish they'd had during the painful process of grief. They also expressed heartfelt gratitude toward those who could see what needed to be done and did it.

In assessing the needs of a grieving person, it helps to understand the circumstances. Don't assume that the death of a ninety-year-old grandmother will be mourned in the same way as the death of a five-year-old child. There are enormous differences in the grief process that depend upon the age of the person who died, how he or she died (for example, was it a sudden death, or did it follow a long illness?) and the gender of the survivor (in our society, it is usually more difficult for men than women to express their grief openly).

Please consider the following guidelines as suggestions only. Most importantly, trust your heart and your instincts.

### 1. **Don't try to lessen the loss with easy answers.**

*"She isn't hurting any more," "It must have been his time," and "Things always work out for the best,"* are remarks that are seldom helpful. It's more important for the bereaved to feel your presence than to hear anything you might say. Remember, there are no ready phrases which will take away the pain of the loss.

#### **Phrases that don't help**

(You may have already said some of these phrases, hoping to be comforting. If so, don't be hard on yourself or feel guilty; just avoid them next time.)

*"It was God's will."* (First find out what the survivor's religious belief is.)

*"Be thankful you have another child."* (This lessens the importance of the child who died.)

*"I know how you feel."* (None of us knows exactly how someone else feels.)

*"Time will heal."* (Time alone does not heal, though it helps. People need time as well as the grief process.)

*"There must have been a reason."* (Perhaps not; life is not always fair or reasonable.)

### 2. **Don't feel that you must have "something to say."**

Your presence is enough. Especially with fresh grief, your embrace, your touch, and your sincere sorrow are all the mourner may need. Be sure to call or visit the survivor, no matter how much time has passed since the death. The griever still appreciates knowing you care.

### **3. Take the initiative.**

Don't merely say, *"If there's anything I can do, give me a call."* Make suggestions and specific offers of help. For example, you might say, *"I'd like to mow your lawn next Saturday morning at ten. Would that be okay with you?"* or *"I'd like to plant the five azalea shrubs that were given at Bill's funeral. Would you like them in your yard, and could I do it next Wednesday after two o'clock?"* or *"May I go grocery shopping with you the first time out?"* Each thoughtful gesture gives something of yourself and keeps the survivor from having to continually reach out for assistance. It also lets the survivor know you think he or she is important. Our self-esteem is often low during the early months of grief, and knowing someone cares enough to help does wonders for our morale.

### **4. Help with everyday concerns.**

You might run errands, answer the phone, prepare meals, or do the laundry. These seemingly minor tasks loom large to the survivor, for grief drastically depletes physical energy. An offer to spend an evening just watching television together can be very comforting, especially to someone now living alone.

### **5. Help with the children.**

If children are involved, send them special cards and invite them on outings with your family. Children should not be shielded from grief, but occasionally they need a break from the sadness at home, while their parents may welcome a day for grieving without them. Show your love and support and invite them to discuss their thoughts and feelings. They need good listeners, too. Don't assume that a child who seems calm is not in pain.

### **6. Listen.**

A bereaved person desperately needs a listener who is accepting and supportive and willing to listen patiently to often repetitive stories. The need to "tell the story" decreases as healing progresses. And each time the story is told, the finality of the death sinks in a little more. When feelings of anger, frustration, disappointment, fear, and sadness are expressed, accept those feelings. If the survivor keeps them bottled inside, they will slow the healing process. Sharing thoughts and feelings lessens the stress. The increased stress experienced during early grief can lead to health problems for some people. Help your friend stay healthy by listening.

### **7. Allow the expression of guilt feelings.**

A natural reaction to hearing someone express guilt is to respond with, *"You mustn't feel guilty. I'm sure you did everything you could."* Don't try to rescue people from their guilt feelings, which are natural and normal during the grief process. (What most people actually feel is regret. Guilt implies a purposeful act that intends injury; we feel regret when we wish we had somehow been able to change things.)

Expressing our "if-onlys" is important. However, if the survivor still talks repeatedly about a specific incident six months after the death, you might ask, *"What could you have done differently?"* After the response, come back with another question: *"Then what might have happened?"* Keep asking nonleading questions until the person concludes that, with the knowledge he had at the time, he did the best he could. (Also, be aware of the difference between realistic and unrealistic guilt. If the feeling is based on reality, professional help may be called for.)

### **8. Allow the survivor to grieve in his own way.**

Don't push the mourner to "get over" the loss. If he needs to rake leaves or chop wood to release energy and tension, let him. If he wants to pore over old pictures or read every book on grief he can find, let him. We all grieve in our own way; avoid being judgmental.

### **9. Accept mood swings.**

Expect good days and bad days for some time. The highs and lows are part of the process. These feelings have been described as waves that sweep in uncontrollably. Gradually the good days become more frequent, but bad ones will occur even a year or more after the death of a loved one.

### **10. Remember special days and times.**

Double your efforts to be sensitive to the mourner's needs during difficult times of the day or on days with special meaning, like holidays, the loved one's birthday or wedding anniversary, or the anniversary of the death. Mark your calendar so you'll remember to reach out to the person on or before those special days.

### **11. Don't protect the mourner from the pain of grief.**

The survivor must adjust to the fact that the loved one is gone. If you attempt to protect her from her grief, you will get in the way. Grief is hard work and others cannot do it for us, though they can help with their support and encouragement. But there is no easy way out. She must walk through the pain to come out on the other side, healthy and stronger.

### **12. Assist in finding self-help groups.**

There are many support groups that exist to help grieving people feel less alone with their grief. They can be very beneficial, as this poem explains:

*Platitudes, well-meaning words, only brush the skin of my existence.*

*But an arm around my shoulder . . .*

*"I know what you mean" from someone who's grieved a loss like mine . . .*

*The tears in the eyes that understand when I speak of my pain and loneliness . . .*

*These help to give me faith that life is still worthwhile.*

*Knowing I am not alone lets me face my sorrow;*

*Only then can I get on with living.*

### **13. Know that recovery takes time.**

Don't expect the grieving person to be "over it" within a few weeks. Great waves of emotion may sweep in for many months and then, slowly and gradually, the intensity subsides. It doesn't happen a day after the funeral or even two months after it, as many people believe. Sometimes the real grieving is just beginning by then. It may be more than a year before you see the results of your caring and support - but when your friend smiles again and feels less pain, the reward is there. If the mourner doesn't seem to be recovering at all, despite your best efforts and the passage of time, suggest professional help to assist in learning new ways of coping. (Find out which professionals in your region are experienced in working with the bereaved. Don't assume that all counselors and clergy are trained in this area.)

**14. Write or verbally share your memories of the one who died.**

During the first few months after a death, there's a tendency to focus on the survivors, while the survivors are focusing on the one who died. By relating your memories of the deceased you are offering a precious memento to the grieving person. Your love and concern are shown not only in what you share, but in the fact that you took the time to do so.

**15. Don't rush the survivor.**

Keep in mind that a grieving person is under extreme stress; don't press him to participate in outside activities until he's ready. Trust him to know what is best.

**16. Know that your friend will always remember her loved one.**

For the rest of her life, a tear may be shed when a special memory is recalled. Your friend is who she is today because of having loved that person. Denying the deceased's past existence denies a part of your friend. Love her past as well as her present, and you and your friend will be the richer for it.