

Ways to help someone who's grieving

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A GOOD FRIEND and one of my mentors says it best: "It is not a subject you want experience in, but when you find yourself in the situation, you are glad you have resources to call upon." Whether you are directly involved, or somewhat removed, knowing where to seek help is extremely important when a friend or a loved one is grieving.

The American Hospice Foundation and the Contra Costa Crisis Center suggest preparing yourself. Your personal preparation can include reviewing a personal grief experience, becoming familiar with the process of grief and pacing yourself; you may be needed for an extended period of time. Helping a grieving person does not end once the memorial has been planned and come to its conclusion.

There are many ways to help. There is the practical form of helping -- making phone calls, keeping their home presentable or keeping track of food and other gifts for thank-you notes. You may also end up running errands or delegating errands to people stepping up to assist. Or you may have to pick up out-of-town friends and relatives, offer to make trips to the airport or help with arranging convenient and affordable lodging. Encourage those in the grieving process to take time out and rest.

The emotional helping can include being a good listener; practice good communication skills not only with words but also be mindful of body language: what is the grieving person saying with his eyes? Is he restless, has his posture changed? Help your friend organize his day, especially if he feels overwhelmed. Help with thank-you notes, share memories, watch the children and be aware of their emotional needs.

You can identify local resources such as:

- The Grief Counseling Project: Provides short-term bereavement support, particularly for those who are grieving sudden or traumatic deaths. (800) 260-0094.
- Grief Support Group, East County: 7 to 8:30 p.m. Tuesdays. Edna Fallman Education Center, Sutter Delta Medical Center, 3901 Lone Tree Way, Antioch. Pre-registration required. (800) 837-1818.
- Widows and Widowers Support: 6 to 8 p.m. Tuesdays through Aug. 28. Hospice of East Bay, 350 John Muir Parkway, Brentwood. Preregistration: 925-887-5678.

When you are helping your grieving friend, try to avoid vacuous platitudes and inane clichés. Avoid saying "I know how you feel." Remember that everyone's emotions are unique, and their reactions will vary.

Other phrases to shy away from: "It's a part of God's plan," "Look at what you have to be thankful for," "This is behind you now; it is time to get on with your life."

Different people need to work out their own feelings on their own schedules, so be mindful of their process. Saying "Call if you need anything," while the thought is nice, isn't helpful. The grieving are not going to call you. Instead, set aside a concrete time that you are going to lend a hand.

Be wary of statements that begin with "You should..." or "You will..." Instead, try, "Have you thought about..." or "You might..."

Allow your friend to express his or her grief. If your friend begins to cry, do not change the subject; instead, give them a hug, make some tea or find a tissue.

Keep in mind that the bereavement process may take a long time. Be the one to take the initiative to pick up the phone and check in, drop off some food so they do not have to deal with it, watch their children to provide them with some downtime, take them for a walk, engage them in a fun activity (a game or a puzzle) and when they are ready, encourage going out and socializing.

If you discover along the way that you have a talent for helping people through the grieving process, then you may want to consider becoming a grief counselor. The Contra Costa Crisis Center provides training. For more information, including training fees, call 925-939-1916.

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