

Helping a Friend in Grief

By: Dr. Alan D. Wolfelt

A friend has experienced the death of someone loved. You want to help, but you are not sure how to go about it. This article will guide you in ways to turn your cares and concerns into positive actions.

Listen with your heart

Helping begins with your ability to be an active listener. Your physical presence and desire to listen without judging are critical helping tools. Don't worry so much about what you will say. Just concentrate on listening to the words that are being shared with you.

Your friend may relate the same story about the death over and over again.

Listen attentively each time. Realize this repetition is part of your friend's healing process. Simply listen and understand.

Be compassionate

Give your friend permission to express his or her feelings without fear of criticism.

Learn from your friend; don't instruct or set expectations about how he or she should respond. Never say, "I know just how you feel." You don't. Think about your helper role as someone who "walks with," not "behind" or "in front of" the one who is mourning.

Allow your friend to experience all the hurt, sorrow, and pain that he or she is feeling at the time. Enter into your friend's feelings, but never try to take them away. And recognize that tears are a natural and appropriate expression of the pain associated with death.

Avoid clichés

Words, particularly clichés, can be extremely painful for a grieving friend. Clichés are trite comments often intended to diminish the loss by providing simple solutions to difficult realities. Comments like, "You are holding up so well," "Time heals all wounds," "Think of all you still have to be thankful for" or "Just be happy that he's out of his pain" are not constructive. Instead, they hurt and make a friend's journey through grief more difficult.

Understand the uniqueness of grief

Keep in mind that your friend's grief is unique. No one will respond to the death of someone loved in exactly the same way. While it may be possible to talk about similar phases shared by grieving people, everyone is different and shaped by experiences in their own unique lives.

Because the grief experience is also unique, be patient. The process of grief takes a long time, so allow your friend to proceed at his or her own pace. Don't force your own timetable for healing. Don't criticize what you believe is inappropriate behavior. And while you should create opportunities for personal interaction, don't force the situation if your grieving friend resists.

Offer practical help

Preparing food, washing clothes, cleaning the house or answering the telephone are just a few of the practical ways of showing you care. And, just as with your presence, this support is needed at the time of the death and in the weeks and months ahead.

Make contact

Your presence at the funeral is important. As a ritual, the funeral provides an opportunity for you to express your love and concern at this time of need. As you pay tribute to a life that is now passed, you have a chance to support grieving friends and family. At the funeral, a touch of your hand, a look in your eye or even a hug often communicates more than any words could ever say.

Don't just attend the funeral then disappear, however. Remain available in the weeks and months to come, as well. Remember that your grieving friend may need you more later on than at the time of the funeral. A brief visit or a telephone call in the days that follow are usually appreciated.

Write a personal note

Sympathy cards express your concern, but there is no substitute for your personal written words. What do you say? Share a favorite memory of the person who died. Relate the special qualities that you valued in him or her. These words will often be a loving gift to your grieving friend, words that will be reread and remembered for years.

Use the name of the person who has died either in your personal note or when you talk to your friend. Hearing that name can be comforting, and it confirms that you have not forgotten this important person who was so much a part of your friend's life.

Be aware of holidays and anniversaries

Your friend may have a difficult time during special occasions like holidays and anniversaries. These events emphasize the absence of the person who has died. Respect this pain as a natural extension of the grief process. Learn from it. And, most importantly, never try to take away the hurt.

Your friend and the family of the person who died sometimes create special traditions surrounding these events. Your role? Perhaps you can help organize such a remembrance or attend one if you are invited.

Understanding the importance of the loss

Remember that the death of someone loved is a shattering experience. As a result of this death, your friend's life is under reconstruction. Consider the significance of the loss and be gentle and compassionate in all of your helping efforts.

About the Author

Author, educator, and grief counselor Dr. Alan Wolfelt is known across North America for his inspirational teaching gifts. Founder and Director of the Center for Loss and Life Transition, Dr. Wolfelt presents numerous educational workshops each year for hospices, hospitals, schools, universities, funeral homes, community groups, and a variety of other organizations.