

# Caring for a grieving friend

It is often not made easy for people to grieve in our society. Having good friends to support and understand is invaluable. Here are some ways you can be more effective in your support.

## Before the funeral

Prepare meals, assist with daily chores (washing, ironing, if children are involved take them to school, etc). Notify relatives and friends.

## Attend the funeral

Sharing in their grief by 'being there' can say so much. Remember to sign the memorial book if available.

## After the funeral

This is when they will really need you. Be there in 3, 6, 9, 12 months or even longer. Be aware that the bereaved will possibly experience many emotions - shock, denial, fear, confusion, sadness/depression, anger, guilt, panic, pre-occupation with their loss. Listen in a non-judgmental way. If the deceased person was a friend of yours, you will be grieving too. You will grieve differently than the person you are supporting and at a different pace. Be gentle on yourself too, as you support your grieving friend.

## Be a good listener

Give the bereaved permission to talk about how they feel. Don't be afraid to mention the deceased person's name. They may need to talk about the deceased many months or years



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later. Be comfortable with silence. Remember, they will have see-sawing emotions. Some days they may not need to talk, but this does not mean they are 'over it'. Be sensitive to their changing moods and feelings. Never force them to talk, only ever encourage. Simply say: "If you feel like talking, I'd really like to listen." Sometimes just having you there is enough. Don't forget to ask them if they want you there. This doesn't mean you stop coming - that particular day they may just need space. Allow them to tell their story as often as they need to - this is part of their healing.

## **Be comfortable with tears**

Theirs and yours. Tears are not a sign of weakness. It can be comforting to share tears. Don't turn the situation around though, to have your grieving friend comforting you. Remember, you don't have to be a comedian when you visit to cover up your own insecurities and feelings of being uncomfortable. Know, however, that it is okay to laugh. Recall happy memories and humorous times which involved the deceased person. They will appreciate that you are able to share with them. Sometimes people just need to know that laughter does not mean forgetting. Of course there will be tears with the laughter and this is okay.

## **Touch - something we can't live without**

A hug, squeeze of the hand or touch on the shoulder are sometimes more powerful than words. Most grieving people need hugs (check with them first). A quiet, friendly sort of hug, says 'I really care'.

## **Anniversaries**

Be aware of special dates, birthdays, wedding anniversary, anniversary of the death. Send a card, call for coffee, write a letter or simply pick up the phone and say, "I was thinking of you today." Let them know you haven't forgotten.

## **Write a letter**

Tell them your own personal thoughts of what the deceased person meant to you. This will be treasured forever.

## **A donation to charity**

This can be a meaningful expression to the bereaved when a donation is sent as a memorial to the one who has died.

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## Support groups

Is your friend aware of any support groups available to assist and help reassure them? These groups can be a positive step to assist them to work through the process of grief. There are groups available for the death of a spouse, parent, child, suicide, murder, baby or miscarriage. Grief is normal, natural and extremely painful.

## Remember - be there in 3, 6, 9, 12 months and 2 years

Let the bereaved know that you really mean it when you ask: "Can I do anything for you?" Often they will say 'no', because they feel a burden on others. Many times don't ask, just do! Include them in your family activities, babysit, visit and take them shopping.

## Above all ...

### Do not say

**"I know how you feel"**. Only the bereaved know how they are feeling. At best, we can try to share those feelings and encourage their expression.

**"Don't cry dear, you've got to be brave for the sake of others"**. This blocks the natural healing properties of tears and encourages feelings to be repressed.

**"Time will heal"**. This often-used cliché offers little comfort when the present feels so painful and the future seems unbearable without a loved one.

**"It's God's will", "God only takes the best"**. Religious platitudes can block grief too. Death is part of our life cycle as is disease, accident and old age. Grief can shake our faith but it may help to remember that, when death comes, God is with us and as we grieve, God is with us too.

**"Don't dwell on the past, you've got to look to the future now"**. Sharing memories, looking at photographs and reminiscing can be therapeutic. It's all part of saying goodbye to the past. Only when they have worked through their grief can the bereaved reorganise their lives and look to the future with hope.

**A final thought.** Helping a friend who is grieving means that you too must be willing to share some of the pain. This takes courage and a special kind of friendship.

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People come to terms with their sorrow in their own way. There are no set rules of behaviour and there is no set time span for recovery. But, it is possible to make the journey through grief, less lonely, less fearful. Just be there without judging, preaching or feeling uncomfortable. Simply allow the grief to take its natural course.

### **Listed below are some resources that will further assist you.**

#### **Books**

Stuck for Words by Doris Zagdanski (Hill of Content 1994)

Healing A Friend's Grieving Heart: 100 Practical Ideas for helping someone you love through loss by Alan Wolfelt PhD (Companion Press 2001)

When Men Grieve: Why men grieve differently and how you can help by Elizabeth Levang (Fairview Press 1998)

#### **Website**

[www.grieflink.asn.au](http://www.grieflink.asn.au)

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