

Bereavement Support Guide

Offering Support to a Grieving Person:

Suggestions for Reaching Out to Someone Who Has Lost a Loved One

Someone you know has lost a loved one. You feel helpless yet you want to find a way to say or do something that will comfort them in their grief. If you haven't experienced the same loss (e.g. a parent, spouse, sibling, child) you may feel uncomfortable reaching out to the grieving person. You don't want to make them feel worse so you might just avoid them. Or, you might be worried that you will say or do something that is not helpful.

The following is an overview of useful practical suggestions when dealing with someone who has suffered a loss. Keep in mind that each individual grieves in his or her own way. There is also no time frame for grieving; the type of loss and circumstances may dictate the way an individual faces their grief.

Reaching out to the grieving person/family is always appreciated when approached in a considerate and thoughtful manner. The following are possible suggestions that address expressions of sympathy, understanding the grieving process, understanding individual grieving styles, ways to honor the memory of the loved one, and more.

A comprehensive list of bereavement books and websites that follow are useful resources for the bereaved as well as for those who wish to gain greater insight into the bereavement process. Temple Emanuel continually strives to be a caring community and by supporting our fellow members during their darkest hours we each have the opportunity to fulfill this mitzvah. It is not only a command that has been handed down from generation to generation but it is the highest act of human kindness.

“Hamakom Yenachem etchem btoch sh'ar aveilei Tzion V'Yerushalayim”

“May God comfort you among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem”

What's Helpful

If you have experienced the same type of loss (e.g., the loss of a child, parent), feel free to share some of your feelings/insights. It makes the grieving person feel understood and not as alone in their grief.

Just listen! You don't have to fill up the silence with words that you feel might rationalize the loss. Let them express the anger, the questions,

What's Not Helpful

Don't say you know how they must feel unless you have experienced the same kind of loss.

However, keep in mind that they may approach the loss in a different manner than you did.

Don't say things such as, "They're in a better place," "It was God's will," "It was their destiny / meant to be", etc. These clichés attempt to

What's Helpful

the pain, the disbelief, and the guilt they may be experiencing. Understand that the bereaved often have a need to talk about their loved one and the circumstances of the death over and over again. It may be helpful to encourage them to talk by asking a gentle question such as, "Can you tell me about it?"

Being there and offering a hug, touch, a simple "I'm so sorry" are ways to provide support and comfort to the grieving person.

Stay focused on the person who died and their story. That is what is meaningful/relevant to the grieving person/family.

Be supportive of how the person grieves. Each individual grieves in his or her own way-with their own grieving style. There is no standard "textbook" way to grieve. Some people are closed off and private while someone else might be very expressive and emotional. Be patient, understanding and respectful.

There is no standard timetable for how long a person grieves. Depending on the type of loss, recovery may take years (or at least much longer than anyone expects it to take). Be patient and supportive. Understand that grief work takes a lot of time as well as emotional and physical energy.

What's Not Helpful

minimize or explain the death. The death may raise serious questions about God's role in this event for the bereaved. Do not presume to offer answers. It may not reflect what the grieving person is feeling at the moment. It's not our place to make a judgment about the death.

Don't try to find just the right words that will take away the pain. Especially when the loss is new, nothing you say (or do) will lessen their pain. Your discomfort about what to say should be secondary to the mourner's grief.

Don't tell your own war stories about the cause of death. "I know someone whose sister died the same way..."

Don't be judgmental about how the grieving person conducts themselves after the loss. They may choose to grieve in ways that you might not. Also, unless you have experienced the same type of loss, you really don't know how you would react. Avoid judgments of any kind. "You should . . ." or "You shouldn't . . ." may not be appropriate or helpful. Decisions and behaviors related to displaying or removing photographs, reliving the death, idealizing the loved one, or expressing anger, depression, or guilt may appear extreme in many cases. These behavior patterns are normal, particularly in the first years following the person's death.

Don't place your own timeframe on a grieving person's healing process. Don't say "it's time to get on with your life" or "it's been such a long time...". Don't assume they've moved past their grief despite outward appearances months or even more than a year later. Often, they are numb for a long time afterward. It takes a very long time to process the loss. As friends and neighbors move on with their own lives after the initial period following the loss, some mistake the grieving person's attempts to regain a sense of normalcy as evidence that they, too, are moving on. However, this is far

What's Helpful

Do make a point of using the deceased's name rather than avoiding it. To not mention their name is one of the most painful things to a grieving person. There is almost never an inappropriate time to mention their loved one's name.

Rely on a close family friend in the first few weeks to let you know how the grieving person/family is doing. They are frequently overwhelmed with messages and can't personally get back to many callers at this time.

Plan to do favors like grocery shopping, laundry, errands, dropping off a meal --without being asked. Try to be aware of what needs to be done and offer specific tasks.

Do overcome your own discomfort of the situation in order to reach out to the grieving person/family, even if you have neglected to do so for weeks or even months. It's never too late to reach out to someone who is grieving. Once you "break the ice" it will be much easier to make contact the next time. Emails, cards, letters, phone messages, charitable donations are appropriate ways to let the person know you are thinking of them.

Share a loving memory of the deceased person. It can even be funny. "I remember when he..." or "She had a great talent for...". Also, if you have photos, videos of their loved one, make copies and send it to them.

At an appropriate time, encourage the grieving person to participate in an activity with you. It

What's Not Helpful

from true. They have to, over time, create a "new normal" and depending on the type of loss (e.g. a child, sibling), the timeframe for healing usually takes years, not months. Remember: The entire first year is a year of "firsts" - first birthday, death anniversary, holidays - without their loved one.

Don't think that if you mention the name of their loved one that you will remind the grieving person of their loss/pain. They are thinking about them constantly anyhow.

Don't leave messages on the phone (or in writing) that ask the grieving person to get back to you. They can't -they're overwhelmed with those requests from others and from the entire grieving process!

Don't tell them to call you if they need anything because they probably never will.

Don't avoid the grieving person because you don't know what to say or because you feel uncomfortable or inadequate. Individuals and families are more likely to reach a healthy, positive resolution of their grief if they receive continuing support and understanding. By offering support, you will ensure that your personal relationship with the grieving individual will not be compromised or severed. Also, don't assume that they are being taken care of by others and you will just be in the way or imposing. Usually, after a number of months pass, the support dwindles.

Don't avoid sharing stories/anecdotes because you think it will make the grieving person sad. Don't be afraid of laughter when sharing an anecdote about the deceased person. It actually can be a helpful healing tool.

Don't stop attempting to reach out to the grieving person to do something together even

What's Helpful

could be coffee, lunch, a walk. Keep trying (even if they say no a few times).

Remember the grieving person on "anniversaries" of the loved one - birthday, death anniversary, holidays. Send a card, email, donation, visit. Continue your contact with the person/family. Grief does not end at the funeral or on the first anniversary. Stay in touch often, and in conversation, as easily as you would mention any other member of the family, don't forget to mention the name of the person who died.

Refer the grieving person/family to an appropriate support group by getting all of the contact information for them. Also, go online or to your local bookstore to read about bereavement/grief/loss to gain more insight.

What's Not Helpful

if they decline the first few times. They might be ready to say yes the next time you ask.

Don't avoid special anniversary dates/holidays that let the grieving person know that you remember their loved one. You may think that it will make them sad, but it actually makes them grateful for your thoughtfulness and for remembering their loved one.

Don't avoid taking the initiative to present the grieving person with support group information or to purchase a bereavement book as a gift.