



How to be a Compassionate Friend for Someone who is in Grief

You can't fix a bereaved person's grief but your support can be comforting and it can help towards the healing of a person's grief.

Included here:

- The bereaved have needs
- 10 tips for supporting someone who is grieving
- What to do and how to help straight after the death
- What to do and how to help at any time
- What NOT to do and say
- Writing an expression of condolence
- Working with the bereaved touches us personally
- You're the one grieving?
- Considerations in professional help

The bereaved have needs

- Initial practical needs
- Freedom to grieve in their own way
- Information
- Someone to listen
- Social support (family, friends and others)
- Opportunities to let it out (to express the grief)
- Empathy & understanding
- A sense of meaning
- Support groups like TCF
- Maybe counselling
- Maybe professional help

Ten tips for supporting someone who is grieving

- **Offer practical support** such as meals, shopping, gardening, errands, lifts, etc. especially in the early days.
- **Accept that everyone grieves differently.** Grief is a normal and natural response to loss but everyone grieves differently.
- **Don't judge.** There is no right or wrong way to grieve. Especially don't say "you should..." or "you shouldn't..."
- **Accept a wide variety of emotions** such as sadness, anger, confusion, fear, guilt, relief, etc. Such varied emotions are a natural response to the death of a loved one.
- **Listen well.** Bereaved people often need to talk about their grief and sometimes it's okay to just sit in silence.
- **Use the name of the lost loved one.** Allow the bereaved person to talk of their loved one and to use their name.
- **Avoid platitudes such as** "At least you have other children", "it was meant to be", "It's God's will", "Maybe God wanted another angel", etc. Well-meant statements like these are unhelpful and often hurtful.
- **Don't say "I understand"** or "I know how you feel". Individual grief is so complex that no-one can really understand how an individual feels.
- **You can't fix it.** No one can take away the pain and sadness but knowing that people care is comforting and healing.
- **Don't assume.** People who are grieving aren't necessarily showing it.

What to do and how to help straight after the death

- Give bereaved people time, don't rush them
- Give bereaved people plenty of time to "say goodbye"
- Give bereaved people every opportunity to retrieve belongings or mementos (photos, locks of hair, etc.). These can be of lasting importance.
- Don't touch what belongs to the deceased without asking the bereaved
- Make it easy for bereaved people to cry or to NOT cry.
- Allow strong emotions such as anger and don't take it personally
- Offer practical support, especially:
 - At home
 - With the funeral
- Any offer of help is appreciated
- Encourage choice in making funeral arrangements, and to take time exploring choices Information
- Encourage them to be patient and not to impose "shoulds" on themselves

What to do and how to help at any time

- No-one can take away the pain and sadness, and no-one can bring the loved one back, but we can help:
- By being available and attentive
- By showing that you care, genuinely and sincerely
- By offering practical support
- By listening well and accepting sadness
- Use the loved one's name (usually).
 - The Elephant in the Room
 - For some people (eg some indigenous Australians) it is disrespectful to say the name of the deceased
- By acknowledging birthdays, death days, other anniversaries and other special days
- By making it easy for the bereaved to talk about the one who has died.
- By sharing memories
- Always ask "How are you?" and mean it
- Be aware that even brief contact with bereaved people can be well remembered
- It is never too late to say 'sorry' if you make a mistake

What NOT to do and say

- Don't avoid them.
- Don't overload or over-impose
- Don't judge
- Avoid thoughtless, insensitive comments
 - Don't compare their loss to any loss you've had e.g. "my died"
 - Don't say "I know", or "I understand" unless you really do
 - Even then don't carelessly say it
 - Avoid useless sayings
 - "It is God's Will"
 - "At least you have another"
 - "He had a good innings"
- If they're angry, don't take it personally
- Don't try to make people feel better
- Don't impose your own views and beliefs
- Don't breach privacy (e.g. with the media)

Writing an expression of Condolence

- Can be very helpful
- It's a gift
- It can be read later – letters are often kept for years after the death
- It must be composed by the sender – use your own words
- Hand writing is more personal but emails can work very well
- Let them know that you care about them and their loss
 - acknowledge their pain
 - express your own sorrow about the death
- Include memories
- More is better

Two examples

A miscarriage...

Dear Karen and Alan,

I was so sorry to receive your letter telling me that your baby had died. I wish I had been there to hug and talk to you both. It's hard for me to be so far away when you are in such pain. Perhaps the baby wasn't visible to many people, but you were three and the two of you were a mother and a father. You made so many preparations for this baby, but it wasn't just the room and the furniture you chose, she was part of your life, your hopes and your dreams. Please be good to yourselves during the difficult months ahead. Take the time you need for your sadness and pain. I will stop by as soon as I return from Perth and I will be with you in the time to come.

*Fondly,
Helen*

A spouse dies...

Dearest Emma,

I was shocked and saddened to hear about Alfred's heart attack and death. I know you had been looking forward to his retirement and to some travel together after all those years of hard work. Even though the two of you were very different, you complemented each other so well. We always thought of you as one. What a terrible loss for you. I want you to know how much Peter and I are thinking of you and that we will be there for you in the long and difficult weeks and months ahead. Please accept our deepest sympathy.

*With my love,
Susan*

Working with the bereaved touches us personally depending on:

- Size of the loss
- Closeness to the loved one
- Closeness to the bereaved
- Previous personal losses
- Potential personal loss
- ... Including our own existence

You're the one grieving?

- Consider Worden's 4 tasks and accept that they happen in fits and starts:
 - Accept the reality of the loss
 - Work through the pain of grief
 - Adjust to a world without the loved one
 - Find an enduring connection with the loved one
- Allow people to help; accept help from others
- Talk to family and friends; share memories and stories, share thoughts and feelings
- Support groups; share with others who understand
- Join in public ceremonies
- Use relevant rituals and customs
- Talk with a counsellor; focus on your unique situation
- Try not to make big decisions for 6 – 12 months
- Keep a diary
- Read books and articles

- Create a memorial – do or make something to honour the person
- Develop your own rituals - light a candle, listen to special music, make a special place to think
- Express thoughts and feelings privately – write a letter or a poem, draw, cry...
- Exercise – do something to use pent-up energy – walk, swim, gardening, chop wood
- Draw on religious and spiritual beliefs as appropriate
- Do nice things to relax and soothe yourself eg massage, aromatherapy, warmth
- See your doctor if you have persistent worries about your health
- Use meditation
- Work out which are useful distractions from your grief

Considerations in professional help

- The person who died
- Nature of attachment
- Mode of death
- Personal factors
- Historical factors

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