



Supporting someone who is grieving

“The friend who can be silent with us in ...an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing, not healing, not curing, that is a friend indeed.”

Henri Nouwen

It's a common experience: what do I say to someone who has experienced a loss? How do I support them without upsetting them further?

Knowing what to say to someone who is grieving won't take their pain away, but your words and actions may provide comfort, and help that person feel supported.

Some tips for supporting people who are grieving:

- Try not to focus too much on getting the words exactly right or worry excessively about saying the “wrong” thing. Most people experiencing a loss understand how difficult it is to be supportive and will accept the positive intention behind the words.
- Make simple statements: ‘Tony, I’m so sorry Glenda died. I will miss her so much. I am very sad for your loss.’
- When speaking to a bereaved person, try to use the deceased person’s name unless you understand that this not helpful for them. As time passes, most find this a comforting way to remember the deceased.
- Share that you are ready and open to listen to the bereaved person’s experiences when they are, there is no rush.
- If you have your own experience of loss, be mindful that supporting someone else who is grieving may bring up painful feelings and memories for you. Be honest with yourself regarding how much you can genuinely offer in terms of emotional or practical support. Also, while your experience may guide you towards understanding and making genuine expressions of sympathy, take care not to assume that everyone’s experience and needs will be the same as yours.
- Keep an open mind about the way that others express grief, which might be quite different from yours, and could be influenced by cultural factors.
- If you feel your attempts to support or offer sympathy are unwelcome, reflect/talk to a friend about what might help and what you are able to offer. Remind yourself that their reaction is not personal.
- Offer practical support, for example; child minding, cooking, house cleaning, lawn mowing. If you are unsure how to help, ask and/or make suggestions. In the midst of grief, they may not know what they want, but it shows you want to understand how best to respond.
- Don’t forget to include the bereaved in invitations to social activities when they come up. They may not want to attend but will appreciate the invitation.
- Spend some time with the bereaved – sometimes this can be the best support you can offer.

There are some phrases that might fit the category of being well-intentioned but may not be helpful in expressing sympathy and support to those experiencing a loss/grief. These include:

- “Time heals all”- People commonly say that they will never get over their loss while this statement implies that the person will ‘get over it’ eventually. This may lead to the bereaved person feeling judged – ‘I should be over it by now’ or that there’s a timeframe for how long they are ‘allowed’ to grieve.
- “I know how you feel” - You know what your experience of grief is/was like, not theirs. Stay focused on their loss.
- “You are doing so well” - Even though they may look like it on the outside, they may be hiding their distress from you and others. Again, this may shut down conversation regarding how things really are for them.
- “Be brave” or “be strong” - What this means to you might not be helpful for the bereaved person. They may be scared and not at all feeling brave, or perhaps getting out of bed this morning was the bravest thing they felt they’ve done all week, or maybe they just don’t want to feel brave or strong, because all they’ve been doing is being brave and strong for others since the death. Again, they may feel judged.
- “It is God’s will”- Are you familiar with their religious or spiritual beliefs and customs? This may not be helpful and may alienate the bereaved.
- “Grieving is a process” - Again, this can be experienced as not as supportive as it is intended. Describing what you think is going on doesn’t allow for the spontaneity, randomness and unexpectedness of grief.

For some people talking about the stages of grief can be helpful but for some it is unhelpful so be cautious using this terminology. The researcher who first coined the ‘stages of grief’ (Elizabeth Kubler-Ross) never intended this to mean that each stage would occur or that they would occur sequentially. She later wrote that grief happens in its own time and fashion and cannot always be neatly resolved. Don’t burden the bereaved by attempting to define their grief as a ‘stage’.

What to do if you think someone needs additional support:

Everyone grieves differently, and it is important not to judge the way that someone responds to loss, or how long they mourn that loss. However, if the person that you’re supporting is very distressed, or you’re concerned about their behaviour and ability to function, or perhaps you feel that you’re unable to give them the help that they need, it’s possible that they would benefit from the help of a counsellor.

If that’s the case, share your concerns with them. Ask them if they would like you to find out what the options are, or if there’s anything they would like you to do to help. If they decline, it is important to respect their wishes.

If you think they are suicidal or may harm themselves or others, ask them. If they express that they are considering suicide or self-harm, they need help immediately even if they decline help or intervention.

For further information about grief, or advice about supporting someone who is grieving:

- Employee Assistance Program (EAP):
Acacia Connection – 1300 364 273
SMG Health – 1800 273 865
- Australian Centre for Grief and Bereavement
www.grief.org.au
- Griefline, a telephone counselling hotline
(03) 9935 7400
- Victoria Police Wellbeing Services
1300 090 995
Mon-Fri 9am to 4pm for support, information and referral to counselling 24/7 phone support for urgent issues
- Lifeline
13 11 14



**Alcohol and Drug
Information Services VIC**
1800 888 236



Turning Point
www.turningpoint.org.au



Police Wellbeing Services
1300 090 995