

## How To Support A Grieving Friend

Sometimes it's hard to know what to say to support a grieving friend. Here are some helpful tips:

1. Although it is often hard to know how to reach out, reach out. Communicate to your friend or loved one that you want to be an ongoing part of his/her grief journey and that you are comfortable listening to his/her pain. Listen to them and remember that silence is OK.
2. Be genuine in your communication. If you do not know what to say, that's OK. "I'm not sure what to say, but I want you to know that I care," is affirming. No one has all the answers.
3. Offer to help in concrete ways. For example, "I'm happy to come over and make dinner for you one night if you would like." Rather than, "Let me know if there is anything I can do." This makes it easier for your friend to access your help when he/she needs it.
4. Encourage your friend to open up about his/her emotions and help them feel comfortable with them – no matter what they are. Grief is not a time for judgment, placating (e.g. "He's in a better place now."), or giving advice about how your friend should be dealing with their grief.
5. Remember that it takes a lifetime. It is tempting to gravitate to resources that explain the grieving process and these are often helpful. But grief is a unique journey for everyone and losing a friend, family member or significant other is a profound experience. Being patient with your friend's emotions – whatever they are – throughout his/her lifetime, is the best support you can offer.
6. Know when to seek additional help. If you sense that your friend is unstable, it is your moral and ethical responsibility to find/refer them to a mental health professional (<http://locator.apa.org>), suicide hotline (1-800-273-8255) or call 911.

### Information about helping a grieving college student friend:

Have you ever heard someone say, "I lost my \_\_\_\_\_." and you sit there and think, what should I say? Sometimes nothing you think of sounds right. Be sure to:

Communicate to your friend that you want to be a part of his/her grieving process and that you are comfortable with just listening.

Remember that grief takes time (years) to learn to live with and never goes away, so be there for them in the days as well as weeks, months, and years following the death.

Encourage your friend to open up about their grieving process with friends, family, and others who have grieved during college.

Encourage your friend to honor their deceased loved one through service to others or an activity that their deceased loved one enjoyed.

Remember that you can't take away their pain, but you can let them know they are not alone.

If the person who is in grief is suicidal, it is your moral and ethical responsibility to find/refer them to a mental health professional (through campus directory, calling suicide hotline: 1-800-273-8255, calling 911).

When speaking with your friend about their grief:

- Empathize with the pain he/she is going through — just knowing that you are there for support will be an immense source of strength.
- Express your concern. Example: “I’m so sorry to hear that this happened to you.”
- Be genuine in your communication and don’t hide your feelings. Example: “I’m not sure what to say, but I want you to know I care.”
- Offer to be helpful in concrete ways rather than as a general statement (“I’m happy to come over and make dinner one night if you need.” vs. “Let me know if there’s anything I can do.”)... follow through with this and repeat your offers!
- Listen in a non-judgmental manner and let them tell their story as many times as they need/want to.
- Allow periods of silence – offer silent support – be a good listener.
- Don’t avoid the deceased person’s name.
- If you knew your friend’s loved one who is deceased, talk about what you loved and miss about the deceased person.

Try to avoid:

- Do not placate (e.g., “He’s in a better place now,” “It’s part of God’s plan,” or “Look at what you have to be thankful for”)
- Do not say that you understand exactly what your friend is going through. Even if a significant loved one of yours has died, one’s reaction to death is very individualized.
- Do not give advice about what your friend should or shouldn’t be doing in his/her own grief process.
- Do not pass judgment on your friend’s timeline of grief there is no set time and remember grief is not a linear process.
- Do not encourage them to make major changes in their life, let the grief process take it’s course.
- Do not try to ‘fix them’ or make it all better — grief is a natural process.
- Do not make statements that begin with “You should” or “You will.” These statements are too directive. Instead you could begin your comments with: “Have you thought about. . .” or “You might. . .”

- Do NOT make assumptions that someone is doing great and “all better” based on their outward appearances – grieving is an internal process (feelings, body sensations, and other individual differences that may never be seen)

### Supporting a Grieving Friend

When a friend you care about is grieving, it’s often difficult to know what to do or say — especially if you haven’t experienced similar grief. Your general discomfort is very human; we all feel some need to help but are unsure of the words or actions that will be most helpful. We’ve created some guidelines to help you navigate these unknown waters, and hope this information provides the insights needed to help both you and the person you hope to support.

#### What to say when supporting a friend in grief:

Thinking about what to say and what not to say can often be a stumbling block to saying anything — and that resulting silence can be extremely painful to the person who is grieving. As hard as it may be to overcome your initial discomfort, acknowledging your friend’s loss is critical to their healing process. The support of family and friends is a key determinant in how long and how painful the grieving process may be, as well as how someone heals and recovers over time. You can be an important part of this recovery process.

#### What to say: Do’s and don’ts

**Don’t:** “I know how you feel” or “I know what you’re going through. My dog died and I...” Saying either of these devalues the bereaved person’s feelings (especially when the loss of a person is being compared to the loss of a pet, no matter how dear). Early on, mourners don’t want to hear about others’ experience with grief — they need to be able to express their own.

**Do:** “I can only begin to imagine what you’re going through” or even “I don’t know what to say, but I’m here” These statements show that you’re focused on your friend, and are open to talking to them about their grief. You can ask what it’s like for them and then listen — don’t try to fix it. Silence is also fine; just being with someone as they grieve, holding their hand, touching their shoulder or just giving them a hug can help with the healing process.

**Don’t:** “You’re not grieving right” or “Shouldn’t you be doing. . .?” There is no right way to grieve. And no one should be judged for how they’re grieving; they may be angry, they may be sad, they may appear to be stoic...you can’t know what is going on inside, and can’t know their pain or inner thoughts.

**Do:** “Are there times of day that are harder or easier for you?” or “What are some of the things that bring you comfort?” Again, these questions show that you’re focused on your friend, and are open to talking to them about what they’re experiencing. Whether or not they are ready to speak about how they’re feeling, your openness and willingness to listen are helpful.

**Don't:** Avoid talking about the person who died. If you avoid mentioning the person they've lost, the griever will feel even more alone in their grief.

**Do:** Mention the lost person by name and share any memories you have of them. Sharing your memories or mentioning their name will help your friend focus on their loved one's life instead of their death, even though it may bring up feelings of grief as well. If the person's death happened in the past, it's still okay to bring up their name. If a key milestone (birthday, anniversary, anniversary of their death, holiday) is approaching, the remembrance of the person who died will also bring your friend comfort.

**Don't:** Don't use clichés, which minimize the loss and emotions the grieving person feels. Clichés to avoid include:

- “Everything happens for a reason.”
- “He/she is in a better place now.”
- “Thank goodness you are young — you can still [have more children/remarry].”
- “It was meant to be.”
- “You have an angel in heaven.”
- “You are so strong. . .I could never handle this.” (Or “You can handle this.”)
- “God would never give you more than you could handle.”
- “You need to move on.”
- “You'll get over it in time.”

**Do:** Say things that provide comfort and acknowledge your friend's loss and struggle:

- “I'm here to listen if you want to talk.”
- “You've been so strong and helpful for your family. If you want to lean on me, I'd be honored to try to help *you*.”
- “It's okay to be angry or frustrated — it's part of loving someone and grieving for them.”  
What you feel is normal and appropriate.”
- “It's okay to cry, and I may cry with you.”
- “I love you.” (Assuming that you do.)