

HOW TO TALK TO SOMEONE IN GRIEF



Give Space

Grieving is one of the most difficult times in a person's life. Often people will want to rush the bereaved through a conversation or avoid it altogether because of their own discomfort. By simply asking, "How are you doing?", or, "Would you like to talk about it?" you provide an open format or the space for them to share the story of their loved one or simply reminisce about this or that memory. The telling of their loved one's story can provide immense healing to the bereaved. Saying the person's name aloud is also comforting to the bereaved. Take your cues from the bereaved person as to how much they would like you to contribute to the conversation.

Say Sorry

Acknowledging their pain and letting them know how sorry you are makes the bereaved person feel heard. You could say, "I'm so sorry for your loss", or "This must be so hard for you right now, I wish I could take your pain away".

Be Open to All Feelings

Accept the various and often conflicting feelings of the bereaved, even if those feelings make you feel uncomfortable. Let the bereaved know that it is okay to feel sometimes surprising and perplexing feelings such as shock, anger, disappointment, disillusionment, abandonment, etc. and that you have a willingness to hear about those feelings.

Remind People to Reach Out for Support

Suggest that they might reach out to family, friends, and community or online resources to help support them with their loss. Remind them that all of us need help from time to time.

Practical Support

If appropriate, offer to assist the bereaved with practical support, such as offering to make a

phone call to connect them with further assistance (or for example, making a meal, mowing a lawn, or caring for children).

Encourage People to Talk

Encourage the bereaved to verbalize their feelings out loud. If he/she is having difficulties talking about the person who has passed, suggest that they journal their feelings or visit a location (i.e. the gravesite or a special place where the two of them used to visit) where they could have privacy to talk to the memory of the person.

Be Present

Do not worry about saying the right thing. Being present and listening is more important. This lets the person experiencing the loss to feel less alone.

Listen

Each passing is different and those who experience the loss grieve in his or her own way, depending on how the person passed, the relationship with the bereaved, the cultural background, the weight of the impact, etc. Listen without judgment and do not assume you have an insight into their grieving because of other similar situations. Therefore, be careful of assumptions that you make about their feelings, and do not say something like, "I know exactly how you feel ..." or "You must be feeling ...".

Don't worry about being Perfect

Being vulnerable and transparent as to not knowing what to say is better than using clichés, which might offend someone. For example, do not say statements like, "You'll get through it, you're strong", or "Everything happens for a reason, life goes on."

Do Not Fix

It can be well intentioned to want to fix things for the bereaved. Therefore, we often use phrases, like, "It was for the best", or "She's at peace now",

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or "At least he had a long life". This can sometimes trigger a person experiencing loss as they may interpret these statements as telling them what to think.

Don't Refer to Religious or Spiritual Contexts

At times people will say, "It is God's will", or "She is in a better place now." These types of comments may fall flat if the person's beliefs do not align with your comments.

Don't Make Predictions about Healing or Recovering from Grief

Do not fall into bad habits of language you have heard via social media, such as, "You need time; time will heal you". Grief experts suggest that one does not necessarily heal from grief, but it is more about finding ways to live with grief. This coincides with people sometimes saying, "I've heard that it takes about two years to heal from grief." In actuality, grief is different for everyone and grief can linger for many, many years.

Further Resources:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l2zLCCRT-nE> (Video - 3:59 minutes)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JIS8HdV2-f8> (Video – 5:03 minutes)

https://www.ted.com/talks/nora_mcinerny_we_don_t_move_on_from_grief_we_move_forward_with_it?language=en (Video – 14:51 minutes)

<https://www.helpguide.org/articles/grief/helping-someone-who-is-grieving.htm> (Article)

<https://www.chpca.ca/resource/grief-and-bereavement-resource-repository/> (Grief and Bereavement Resource Repository)

<https://www.griefcounselor.org/resources/helpful-websites/> (Helpful Websites for Grieving)

References:

<https://www.sueryder.org/how-we-can-help/bereavement-information/supporting-someone-else/what-to-say#:~:text=Offer%20them%20space%20to%20talk,to%20talk%20about%20it%3F%22>.

<https://www.hrv.org/blog/10-ways-to-help-a-grieving-friend/#:~:text=Encourage%20the%20person%20to%20reminisce,person%20who%20experienced%20the%20loss>.

<https://www.boltonhospice.org.uk/news/2020/12/what-to-say-and-what-not-to-say-to-someone-who-grieving>



For more information, resources or support on this topic...

Call your EAP at 1-800-667-0993 (available 24/7/365)