

LISTEN.
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Listening to someone who is going through loss is different to the listening you'd do in normal conversations. This will really help the person, as grievers need to be heard.

How to listen

One of the hardest and yet most important things to do when supporting someone who is bereaved is to resist the urge to fix things.

When we see someone we care about suffering, we want to make things better. We come up with logical reasons why things happened the way they did, or we might share our own experience thinking it might help - but it doesn't.

If they are in deep mourning, there is little you can say to alleviate their pain. However, there is something you can do that will make a significant difference, you can be present and listen, really listen.

But we're good at listening, right? We listen all the time, every waking minute of every day. Our family, colleagues, friends, music, TV and so on - listening is second nature. But are you REALLY listening?

The level of attention to listening that grievers need goes beyond our everyday listening skill, but can be learned. Here are some pointers to help you.

Be fully present

Remove any distractions from your mind. What's for dinner tonight doesn't matter, the urgent work issue can wait, even preparing what you're going to say next can prevent you from giving your full attention.

Being fully present means your body language, your facial expressions and your vocal signals show your loved one that they are your sole focus, and will encourage them to share how they're feeling.

If you are in a position where you know you cannot give the griever your full attention e.g., you are on your way to a meeting, schedule a time to meet up with the griever when you know you can be fully present with them.

Remove judgement, comparison or expectations

Everyone's grief is unique. No two people will grieve the same, because no two people share the exact same life experiences. Therefore, expecting someone to have the same reaction you have, or feeling frustrated because their suffering seems worse than yours, are sure fire ways of shutting down your loved one, making it less likely they will open up to you again.

Listening without judgement, comparison, or expectations takes practice. If you are fully in the moment, you will notice when your feelings are being triggered and you'll be able to reign them in. Remember, just because they may not be mourning like you have or would, doesn't make their grief, or your grief any less valid.

Practice empathy

Empathy is one of the most noble human attributes - and consequently one of the hardest to learn. It goes beyond the sympathy of feeling sorry for someone while keeping yourself detached from their situation.

Empathy can be uncomfortable because it means walking a mile in someone else's shoes, in order to try to feel how they are feeling - not to review how you would manage the situation, but to simply share a little bit of their pain, and understand something of what they are going through.

Feel comfortable with silence

Here's something else that might not come naturally, and will likely cause discomfort too. Silence doesn't always need to be broken, left alone it can be an opportunity for your loved one to collect their thoughts, or to work through their feelings.

Often, just being there is enough, and the silence can signal that you are there for them, not to impart some well worded wisdom, or to get busy trying to fix things in an attempt to avoid the intensity of your own feelings.

Resist the urge to fix things

Okay, so I've mentioned this a couple of times now, but that's because it's important. Practical support is essential, but when it spills over into advice like 'you've got to keep yourself busy' or 'you must be strong for...', it can become about making yourself feel more comfortable with the situation, rather than letting your loved one properly grieve.