**"Simple Steps to Support a Person in Grief"**

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Have you ever looked into the eyes of a person in grief?

As you read this, picture yourself standing there as a bereaved person is pouring out their story, their tears, and their feelings of utter despair. Experience yourself looking at this person wondering: What should I say? Not say? Do? Not do? That’s what this article is about. Over the past several years I’ve asked people coping with the death of a loved one, “What did those around you do that helped?” and “What did not help?” Here is what they said. Some of these suggestions you may already be familiar with. Good for you. Let’s look at what works and what doesn’t:

**1. Things you can say**

I’m so sorry.

I don’t know what to say; but, I’m here for you.

Tell me what happened. I’m here to listen.

This must be so hard for you.

Tell me, really, how are you doing?

How’s your concentration doing through all this?

What do you need at this moment?

**2. Things not to say**

Clichés What follows are just a few from a long list. If any of these begin to form in your mouth—quick—bite your tongue: I know just how your feel; It’s God’s will; You’re strong; Everything happens for a reason; Life goes on; Think of all your precious memories….

Your Story Even if the same thing happened to you (their brother died, so did yours), while it is OK to mention it, do not tell your entire story. It’s their turn.

A Related Story This is not the time to show this person how you are like them. They got into an accident that was their fault—don’t say, “Oh, I know just how you feel. The same thing happened to my brother (or a guy at work or me) last year.” As tempting as it is, do not go there.

Words to avoid beginning a sentence:

At least….This says, “As terrible things are for you right now, look at all you should be grateful for.” Don’t go there. If a friend has just informed you that her son died, do not say, “At least you have your other two children.” She knows. But she’s hurting and your job is to stay right there with her pain.

You should/must/need to. This is judgment. Your friend does not need to be told what to do or how to feel.

Don’t—as in “Don’t cry.” (Voted #1 worst advice by people in grief).

​**3. Things not to do**

Because the person appears to be doing OK, you move on with your daily life and end up not checking to see how the person is doing. A person in deep grief can, when the situation calls for it, appear to doing OK. Do not let appearances fool you.

You refrain from saying the deceased person’s name or you don’t bring up a story about that person. Acting as if the person never existed is the worst thing you can do. Instead, say the name, tell a story and watch the person light up.

You assume that, with time, the bereaved person will somehow get back to normal. Following the death of a significant loved one, there is no “return to normal.” People live with the loss forever.

**4. Things you can do**

Touch the person in whatever way would be comfortable for him or her: a handshake, hand on the shoulder, arm around the person, a light hug, a deep hug, a kiss on the cheek.

Shut your mouth and let the person do more of the talking.

During those moments when you and the person experience a lull in your conversation, permit awkward silence. Resist the temptation to “fill the airwaves with words.” Instead, just “be” with the person in silence until he or she says something.

Let the person be in pain as you say to yourself, “There is nothing I can do to fix this. There is nothing I can do or say to make it better. What I can do right now—as uncomfortable as it feels—is to just be here and let this person feel the pain of the loss.”

If you and the person have a religious/spiritual belief, ask if you can pray with them and/or read comforting words from their religious text.

Let the person cry and cry and cry. Remember this little poem: “To help another in pain: Let’em cry until they’re dry.”

Things you can say hours, days, weeks or months later

“I was thinking about (the name of their loved one) yesterday and I remember the time when she....”

“I miss her, too.”

If it’s the deceased’s birthday or it has been one month, one year (or more) since the death, send a text, an email, a voice mail, or a card saying, “I’m thinking of you and \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.”

Check in with this person from time to time. Weeks, months or even years later, do not be afraid to ask, “How are you doing with \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_’s death?”

Remind the person, “I’m here for you.”

There they are. Count them: 24 sound suggestions for what you can do (or not do) to help a fellow human in grief. So, what are you waiting for? Get out there and show you care. People in grief need more people like you, don’t they?