

Helping Others Cope With Grief

If someone you know has lost a loved one, it's natural to want to offer compassion and sympathy as he or she grieves; however, you may not know how to do so. While not everyone wants or needs the same kind of support, this guide provides suggestions on how to support a grieving adult. For information on how to help a child who is grieving, Please refer to *A LifeCare® Guide: Helping Children Cope With Grief*.

If you are also grieving a death while trying to support a loved one, you may need additional help. Please refer to *A LifeCare® Guide: Grief and Bereavement* for information on managing your own grief.

Supporting Someone Who Is Grieving

Grieving people most often need others to simply listen and care, not offer a lot of advice. While you may not be able to ease another person's pain, you can help him or her manage this difficult experience. The following suggestions may help:

- ◆ **Mention the person who has died, and acknowledge your awareness of the loss.** Continue to do this as time goes on, not just right after the death. Often, people avoid the topic because they feel uncomfortable or helpless, or because they fear it will remind the grieving person of his or her pain, but behaving as if you don't remember or are unaware of your loved one's pain often leaves him or her feeling very alone.
- ◆ **Listen to your loved one.** A grieving person may need to tell his or her story again and again as part of the grieving process. The way you can most help someone is by communicating a willingness to stay with him or her despite the pain.
- ◆ **Insist that your loved one see a doctor if he or she exhibits signs of depression.** Intense grief can lead to depression. If your loved one seems unusually depressed or withdrawn,

"My best friend of 20 years recently lost her husband to a heart attack," says Carlene. "I want to be there for her and support her in any way I can, but I'm just not sure how to help."

suggest that he or she seek professional help. See the next section, "Symptoms Associated With Grief," for more information.

- ◆ **Offer practical help; don't wait to be asked.** Grieving takes a lot of energy, making the tasks and demands of daily living feel overwhelming at times. Help by bringing over dinner, offering to do the shopping or cleaning, baby-sitting, gardening, etc. Make specific offers several times, and encourage your loved one to take you up on your offers. For example say, "Let me cook you dinner tomorrow," or "I'd like to watch the kids tonight; why don't you take a break?"
- ◆ **Remember that grieving is a long process.** The person you care about may be grieving for a long time. Several months or more after the death, he or she may actually be feeling the loss more acutely, and much of his or her support system will have backed off. This is when your loved one may need your support the most. Birthdays, holidays and other events may also evoke strong feelings for your grieving loved one.
- ◆ **Don't minimize the loss.** Be careful not to say, "I know exactly how you feel." This can minimize your loved one's unique feelings. If you have been through the loss of someone dear to you, you know how you felt, but you don't know just how the grieving person feels now. Instead, use statements such as, "I know this is difficult," "I know how hard it was for me when my mother died," or some other statement that is heartfelt and accurate, but leaves room for the uniqueness of your loved one's experience.

- ♦ **Encourage your loved one to share his or her feelings.** Avoid saying things like, “Be strong for...,” or, “Don’t cry.” This sends the message that you are uncomfortable with your loved one’s intense feelings and, therefore, you will leave him or her emotionally alone. Since most people feel somewhat overwhelmed by the intensity and unfamiliarity of grief, they may be worried that they will be unable to cope, so these phrases may in fact reinforce their fears rather than help. Instead, encourage your loved one by saying, “It’s okay to cry,” or “You don’t have to be so strong.”
- ♦ **Help your loved one create new traditions, rituals or activities.** Because it is difficult to deal with change, help your loved one re-engage in life. For example, if your loved one used to go for morning walks with the person who passed away, offer to spend mornings walking together or engaging in a new activity. Holidays and other events filled with tradition can also be especially hard to deal with; try to help your loved one discover new ways to experience these events. At the same time, he or she should be encouraged to cherish the memories and/or traditions associated with the person who has passed away.
- ♦ **Give advice cautiously.** Avoid offering advice with phrases such as, “You should...,” or, “You need to....” Often, those grieving are told, “You need to get out more,” “You shouldn’t be alone,” or “You should get rid of his clothes; you have too many reminders.” Again, the message to your loved one is that you think he or she should not be grieving, and this message may increase, not decrease, his or her sense of isolation. Instead, give advice that encourages the grieving person to trust him or herself and make choices based on his or her needs, rather than on what others think he or she should be doing or feeling.

Symptoms Associated With Grief

Following a loss, most people will experience a variety of physical and emotional reactions to grief. These are all a normal part of the grieving process, and each person’s reactions will be individual and unique (i.e., they will vary in duration and intensity). However, if these reactions become severe and interfere with your loved one’s ability to function on a daily basis, insist that he or she seek professional help from a doctor or licensed therapist. Some common symptoms include:

Physical symptoms—These include shortness of breath, headaches, nausea, changes in appetite (either a loss or an extreme increase), insomnia and fatigue. Intense grief also compromises the immune system, so grieving persons may get sick more often and for longer periods of time. *Note*—If your loved one is having new, sudden or extreme physical symptoms, such as chest pain, consult a physician immediately.

Denial—Shock and disbelief are natural reactions to the news of a loss. Denying a loved one’s death is a coping mechanism that allows people to get through the first few days of grief. Denial (and the resulting numbness) may help your loved one process what has happened and accept the reality of the loss.

Sadness—Most people expect to feel sad immediately after someone’s death. But people who suffer a loss may feel sadder as time goes on, especially once they resume their daily routine; at this point, they may acutely feel the absence of the person who has died. They may also feel sad if their support system of friends and family has become more distant.

Anger—Being angry at a higher power, friends, relatives—and even the person who died—is a common reaction to grief. Try to help your loved one learn healthy ways to release his or her anger, such as writing in a journal, talking to friends or exercising. Positive thinking also helps; for example, if the person died of cancer, encourage your loved one to volunteer with cancer support/research groups.

If your loved one is extremely angry for an extended period of time, he or she might not be coping well with grief. If he or she has fits of rage, lashes out at others, or begins to act violently by hurting him or herself or others (especially a spouse or children), encourage your loved one to seek professional help immediately.

Anxiety—Since death is an occurrence that cannot be controlled, many people react by feeling anxious, restless and unusually nervous. Your loved one may be feeling especially vulnerable and helpless, thinking that something else bad will happen. Help him or her calm down by taking deep, relaxing breaths; focusing on pleasant (not fearful or anxious) thoughts; and reducing worry.

Lack of concentration—This is one of the most common symptoms of grief. People who are grieving may seem more confused than usual, and become forgetful or easily distracted. A degree of preoccupation is normal, so if your loved one is having trouble concentrating, be patient; suggest that he or she focus on his or her feelings, and return to the task at hand when he or she feels ready.

Altered dreams—Dreams are often a combination of events from the past, current experiences, fears, hopes and anxieties. Sometimes, dreams are a signal from the subconscious mind that time is needed for healing. If your loved one has an especially strange dream or a nightmare, encourage him or her to discuss it with you or another friend or family member. If the dreams persist—or become more vivid and/or frightening—encourage your loved one to seek professional help from a physician or licensed therapist.

Guilt—Guilt is a common reaction to grief, often making people feel as if they could have made things better or done something to keep the deceased person alive. Many people feel guilty over unresolved conflicts, or have regrets about things they said (or didn't say) to the deceased. Some people may also feel sad if they weren't able to be with the deceased at the time of death. If this is the case, remind your loved one that death is out of our control, and encourage him or her to focus on positive memories.

Extreme grief may cause a chemical change in a person's body that can lead to depression. If you recognize any of the following warning signs in your loved one—especially if he or she has been suffering for an extended period of time—encourage him or her to consult a doctor or a mental health professional for help:

- ◆ Feelings of intense depression, hopelessness or apathy
- ◆ Decreased interest and participation in activities he or she previously enjoyed
- ◆ Inability to handle routine life and work tasks
- ◆ Noticeable physical changes, such as extreme weight loss or gain, stomach problems, severe headaches, sleep changes, inattention to personal hygiene/appearance, etc.
- ◆ Suicidal feelings. If your loved one mentions suicide—even in a joking manner—take him or her seriously and seek immediate professional help.

Relief—If the deceased person was sick for a long time or if his or her suffering was significant, your loved one may experience a sense of relief at the death. Reassure your loved one that feeling relieved is a natural emotion since the person's pain and suffering has ended.

Hopelessness—Your loved one may feel a sense of hopelessness and feel physically, mentally, socially or spiritually beyond repair, but these feelings generally dissipate over time. In time, grieving individuals develop a sense of hope; they will have good portions of days, then eventually entire good days. There will undoubtedly be rough times along the way (especially birthdays, anniversaries, holidays, etc.), but it's important that your loved one remain focused on the good times ahead.

Moving On

It can be difficult to watch someone close to you cope with a loss. Showing your support and compassion can help tremendously—just by offering a shoulder to cry on or an ear to listen. Be patient, and encourage your loved one to take all the time he or she needs to grieve—and know that he or she will heal in time.

Suggested Reading

I Can't Stop Crying: It's So Hard When Someone You Love Dies, by John D. Martin and Frank Ferris. Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1992.

This book was written for individuals who have recently lost someone close to them. Practical examples show how grief affects many areas of daily life, relationships with others and hopes for the future.

I Don't Know What to Say: How to Help and Support Someone Who Is Dying, by Robert Buckman. New York: Vintage Books, 1992.

The author, himself diagnosed with a terminal illness, addresses the patient's need for information, as well as the needs of family and friends; the way to support a dying parent or child; and the complications of caring for those afflicted with AIDS or cancer.

On Death and Dying, by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997.

This is the "classic" bestseller introducing the famous "five stages" model by the woman who popularized the field of thanatology (the study of the phenomena of death and of the psychological mechanisms for coping with them) as a subject for general social commentary.

Safe Passage: Words to Help the Grieving Hold Fast and Let Go, by Molly Fumia. Berkeley, Calif.: Conari Press, 1992.

Words of comfort for those who have suffered a loss move the reader through the raw emotions of grief—denial, anger, confusion, guilt and loneliness—to acceptance and transformation.

What to Do When a Loved One Dies: A Practical and Compassionate Guide to Dealing With Death on Life's Terms, by Eva Shaw. Irvine, Calif.: Dickens Press, 1994.

From organ donation and planning the funeral to living with suicide and practical matters of trusts and wills, this indispensable reference guides the reader through a wide range of concerns related to the death process.

When Bad Things Happen to Good People, by Harold Kushner. New York: Avon Paperbacks, 1994.

A Jewish rabbi facing his own child's fatal illness gives wise, compassionate and practical advice on how to cope with anger, guilt and grief following potentially overwhelming losses. It offers spiritual guidance that goes beyond the limits of traditional religious boundaries.

You Can Help Someone Who's Grieving, by Victoria Frigo, Diane Fisher and Mary Lou Cook. New York: Penguin USA, 1996.

This book gives common-sense advice on how to help a grieving friend. It addresses the problem many people feel when they're not sure what to say or do when someone close to them has suffered a loss, and offers practical suggestions on how to help.

Helpful Resources

American Self-Help Clearinghouse

100 E. Hanover Avenue, Suite 202
Cedar Knolls, NJ 07927-2020
973-326-6789

<http://www.mentalhealth.net/selfhelp/>

This national organization provides information on local self-help group clearinghouses worldwide, which can help you find and form bereavement self-help groups.

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The Compassionate Friends

PO Box 3696
Oak Brook, IL 60522-3696
877-969-0010 (toll-free)
630-990-0010
<http://www.compassionatefriends.org>
A national, nonprofit, self-help support organization that offers friendship and understanding to families who are grieving the death of a child of any age, from any cause.

GriefNet

<http://griefnet.org>
GriefNet is an online system that can connect you with a variety of resources related to death, dying, bereavement and major emotional and physical losses. It offers information and online discussion and support groups for bereaved persons and those working with the bereaved, both professional and lay persons.

Growth House, Inc.

<http://growthhouse.org>
This web site is an international gateway to resources for life-threatening illness and end-of-life care. Growth House's primary mission is to improve the quality of compassionate care for people who are dying. The site also provides information on helping family members cope with grief and bereavement.

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