



OUR HOUSE helping grieving hearts heal

# What to Say, What to Do:

## Suggested Ways to Support Someone Who is Grieving

### Instead of saying...

*"I'm sorry."*

This can be perceived as impersonal or inappropriate to the griever. They may respond with *"What are you sorry about?"*

*"I know how you feel" or "I know exactly what you are going through; my dog died."*

Saying this may cause the bereaved person to feel that you are devaluing their individual grief. Very early on, grievers don't want to hear about someone else's grief experience.

*"You are looking so much better, are you feeling better yet?"*

Grievers often resent being given the message that others need them to be all better.

*"You're not grieving right. You should do it this way..."*

Remember that there is no "right" way to grieve. Grief is personal and will be different for each person.

### Instead of doing this...

*Don't wait for the griever to call you to ask for what they need.*

When someone is grieving, it can be difficult for them to recognize what they want or need and even more difficult to ask for help.

*Don't get mad because the griever is forgetful or not giving you enough attention.*

It is normal for someone who is grieving to forget things easily, even if this is uncharacteristic of their previous manner.

*Don't force all of your new found ideas onto the griever.*

Sometimes the person you are trying to help wants to be left alone. They may shut down if prodded too much.

*Don't avoid talking about the person who died because it might upset the griever.*

Not mentioning the person who died is likely to make the griever feel even more alone in their grief. They often ask *"Am I the only one who remembers the person who died?"*

### Try saying...

*"My condolences." or "I am so sorry to hear of the death of \_\_\_\_\_"*

Saying this acknowledges the person's experience and gives them an opportunity to talk about the person who died or about how they are feeling.

*"I can only begin to imagine what you are going through and how you are feeling."*

This statement demonstrates that you are truly focusing on them and their unique process. Ask them what it is like for them. Don't assume that you know what they are feeling or thinking.

*"I don't know what to say, but I am here. We can talk if you want or I can just be here with you."*

Though it can sometimes feel uncomfortable to sit with someone in silence, it may be better than saying something that isn't helpful.

*"Are there times of day that are harder or easier for you? What are some of the things that bring you comfort?"*

There are a wide variety of physical, emotional, cognitive, and behavioral responses to grief. What is right for one person may not suit someone else.

### Try doing this...

*Do take the initiative and do something for them.*

Offer to come over for a visit, bring them something to eat or take them out. If you see something that needs to be done, ask their permission and do it!

*Do help the griever to remember important appointments, projects and events.*

Grieving can be an all-consuming process. Compassion and patience are the key. A friendly reminder phone call or an offer to accompany them to an appointment may be very welcomed.

*Do be attentive and respectful of the griever's feelings and wishes.*

Being a good listener sometimes means holding back your opinions and supporting them where they are in their process.

*Do mention their name and share your memories and wishes.*

Even if the death was a long time ago, take a risk and mention the person. If you know that there is an important life-cycle event approaching, be aware that this may bring about a strong grief reaction. Your remembering can bring tremendous comfort.

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*...providing our community with grief support services, education, resources and hope*

## **WAYS TO HELP A GRIEVING FRIEND**

Far too often, grieving children are left to grieve alone either because their grief goes unrecognized or because well meaning people simply don't know what to say or do.

In your role as teacher, counselor, or family friend you can help the grieving child get the support they need by equipping their classmates and friends with information about the cause of death and ideas of ways they can be there for the grieving child.

### **1. Before the child returns to school:**

- Stay in touch by phone, text message, email etc.
- Make cards or cookies to deliver to the family
- Attend the funeral or memorial service

### **2. When the child returns to school:**

- Be sure to make eye contact and greet the grieving child warmly
- Invite the grieving child to eat lunch, walk between classes
- Schedule play dates
- Offer help with homework

### **3. Helpful things to say:**

- I'm sorry your mother died.
- I've missed you.
- I've been thinking about you.
- I can't imagine what it feels like.
- I'm here for you if you want to talk.
- Would you like to come over to my house?
- Do you want to talk about what happened?

(adapted from "A Guide to Help Grieving Children, Goldman, L.)



## Developmental Stages and Children's Responses to Grief

Approximate Developmental Age	Grief Reactions	Helpful Approaches
<u>Ages Infant to 2</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General distress, irritability, shock, despair</li> <li>• Changes in amount of crying, eating and toilet habits</li> <li>• Sleeplessness</li> <li>• Fear of abandonment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Need for a consistent nurturing person if that key person has died</li> <li>• Include in funeral rituals</li> </ul>
<u>Ages 2 to 5</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Confusion</li> <li>• Separation anxiety</li> <li>• Depressed or withdrawn</li> <li>• Nightmares</li> <li>• Regression to earlier stages of development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer honest and direct answers to questions</li> <li>• Reassure the child that there are others who will care for her</li> <li>• Foster a secure, loving environment</li> <li>• Read books depicting other families who have experienced death</li> <li>• Draw</li> <li>• Include in funeral rituals</li> </ul>
<u>Ages 5-8</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Struggles to understand death in concrete way</li> <li>• Denial that it could happen to themselves or other family member</li> <li>• May ask questions repeatedly</li> <li>• Anger, Sorrow, Confusion</li> <li>• Activity levels increase</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use simple, direct words or phrases</li> <li>• Avoiding euphemisms aids in ability to trust</li> <li>• Offer physical outlets</li> <li>• Reassure the child about the future and the surviving parent or guardian</li> <li>• Draw, read grief-related books and play together regularly</li> <li>• Include in funeral rituals</li> </ul>
<u>Ages 8-12</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Able to formulate realistic concepts</li> <li>• Finality of death is understood</li> <li>• Death is universal, an inevitable experience that can happen to everyone</li> <li>• Death as the end of life is perceived as a very frightening and painful event</li> <li>• Concept of death as magical is replaced by the belief that death is terminal</li> <li>• May be morbidly curious or phobic about death</li> <li>• Begin searching for their own philosophy of life and death</li> <li>• May have difficulty concentrating</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Offer honest and direct answers...children need trust and truth</li> <li>• Remember avoidance may create further anxiety...the difficult reality is better than uncertainty</li> <li>• Offer physical outlets</li> <li>• Create opportunities to talk (as a family)</li> <li>• Reassure the child about the future and the surviving parent or guardian</li> <li>• Draw</li> <li>• Read books about other families dealing with death</li> <li>• Include in funeral rituals</li> </ul>

Approximate Developmental Age	Grief Reactions	Helpful Approaches
<u>Adolescents</u>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sadness, shock, denial, anxiety, anger, depression</li> <li>• Difficulty concentrating</li> <li>• Decline in quality of schoolwork</li> <li>• Withdrawal from family and friends</li> <li>• Physical complaints, constant fatigue or drowsiness</li> <li>• Unresolved grief may be reflected in drug or alcohol abuse, impulsive/risk taking behaviors</li> <li>• Separation/Individuation process may be impacted due to increased responsibilities at home, ensuing guilt or fear</li> <li>• Desire to protect the surviving parent, guardian or siblings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reactions may appear similar to adults, however, they have fewer coping skills</li> <li>• May feel vulnerable and need to talk</li> <li>• Inquire about who they are talking with (most adults assume that that adolescents are talking with their friends about the death and most of their friends assume they are talking with an adult)...often they are not talking about death and need to be encouraged to do so.</li> <li>• Include in funeral rituals</li> </ul>
	<b>Several Grief Indicators</b>	
<u>Physical or Behavioral</u>	<u>Emotional</u>	<u>Intellectual</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Accident Prone</li> <li>○ Alcohol Drug Abuse</li> <li>○ Appetite Changes</li> <li>○ Constipation</li> <li>○ Diarrhea</li> <li>○ Dizziness</li> <li>○ Hives</li> <li>○ Insomnia</li> <li>○ Low Energy</li> <li>○ Nausea (recurrent)</li> <li>○ Overeating</li> <li>○ Stomachaches</li> <li>○ Weakness (especially in legs)</li> <li>○ Weight Gain</li> <li>○ Weight Loss</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Agitation</li> <li>○ Anger</li> <li>○ Overly compliant</li> <li>○ Depression</li> <li>○ Guilt</li> <li>○ Irritability</li> <li>○ Envy</li> <li>○ Loss of Self-esteem</li> <li>○ Moodiness</li> <li>○ Nightmares</li> <li>○ Preoccupation with the past</li> <li>○ Restlessness</li> <li>○ Sadness</li> <li>○ Self critical</li> <li>○ Thoughts of Death, Suicide</li> <li>○ Either avoidance of or excessive need for intimate relationships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Confusion</li> <li>○ Disbelief</li> <li>○ Forgetfulness</li> <li>○ Inability to Concentrate</li> <li>○ Memory Loss</li> <li>○ Over Achievement</li> </ul>