

Supporting Friends or Family Who Are Grieving

Death and grief spare no one and are normal life events. All cultures have developed expectations and norms about coping with death. It is important to understand someone else's loss from the perspective of the cultural and family traditions unique to that individual.

When people are grieving, thoughts and emotions are often heightened. People who care about the bereaved are often unsure about how to be helpful; they do not know what to say or do. The primary and most important thing to do is to show that you care by being present and by listening and supporting family and friends who are grieving. Offering advice or suggestions is not needed; try to become comfortable with quietly supporting a person with your presence.

There is no right way to grieve and mourn. Be very careful not to impose your ideas, beliefs and expectations on someone else, no matter how much you think it might help. The following are some suggestions of ways you can support a grieving friend or family member.

- **Acknowledge all feelings.** Their grief reactions are natural and necessary. Do not pass judgment on how well they are or are not coping.
- **Understand and accept cultural and religious perspectives about illness and death that may be different from your own.** For example, if a family has decided to not allow their children to attend the funeral because of their beliefs that children should not be exposed to death, support their decision even if this may not be what you would do.
- **Acknowledge that life won't "feel the same" and the person may not be able to "get back to normal."** Help the person to renew interest in past activities and hobbies, when they are ready, or to discover new areas of interest. Offer suggestions such as, "Let's go to the museum on Saturday to see the new exhibit," but be accepting if your offer is declined.

- **Be willing to stay engaged for a long time.** Your friend or family member will need your support and presence in the weeks and months to come after most others will have withdrawn.
- **Be specific in your willingness to help.** Offer assistance with chores such as childcare or meals. For example, suggest, “I’ll bring dinner on Thursday; how many people will be there?”
- **Check on your friend or relative as time passes and months go by.** Periodic check-ins can be helpful throughout the first two years after the death. Stay in touch by writing a note, calling, stopping by to visit, or perhaps bringing flowers.
- **Be sensitive to holidays and special days.** For someone grieving a death, certain days may be more difficult and can magnify the sense of loss. Anniversaries and birthdays can be especially hard. Some people find it helpful to be with family and friends, others may wish to avoid traditions and try something different. Extend an invitation to someone who might otherwise spend time alone during a holiday or special day, and recognize that they may or may not accept your offer.
- **Identify friends who might be willing to help with specific tasks on a regular basis.** Performing tasks such as picking up the kids from school or refilling prescriptions can be a big help.