



Suggestions for the Friends and Relatives of the Grieving Survivor

Yes, there is much that you can do to help. Simple things. This guide suggests the kinds of attitudes, words, and acts, which are truly helpful.

The importance of such help can hardly be overstated. Bereavement can be a *life-threatening* condition, and your support may make a vital difference in the mourner's eventual recovery.

Perhaps you do not feel qualified to help. You may feel uncomfortable and awkward. Such feelings are normal - don't let them keep you away. If you *really care* for your sorrowing friend or relative, if you can enter into his or her grief, you are qualified to help.

In fact, the *simple communication of the feeling of caring* is probably the most important and helpful thing anyone can do. The guidelines, which follow, show how to communicate your care.

- **Get in touch.** Telephone. Speak either to the mourner or to someone close and ask when you can visit and how you might help. Even if much time has passed, it's never too late to express your concern.
- **Say little on an early visit.** In the initial period (before burial), your brief embrace, your press of the hand, your few words of affection and feeling may be all that is needed.
- **Avoid clichés and easy answers.** "He had a good life," "He is out of pain," and "Aren't you lucky that...," are not likely to help. A simple "I'm sorry" is better. Likewise spiritual sayings can even provoke anger unless the mourner shares the faith that is implied. In general, **do not attempt to minimize the loss.**
- **Be yourself.** Show your own natural concern and sorrow in your own way and in your own words.
- **Keep in touch.** Be available. Be there. If you are a close friend or relative, your presence might be needed from the beginning. Later when close family may be less available, anyone's visit and phone call can be very helpful.
- **Attend to practical matters.** Discover if you might be needed to answer the phone, usher in callers, prepare meals, clean the house, care for the children, etc. This kind of help lifts burdens and creates a bond. It might be needed well beyond the initial period, especially for the widowed.
- **Encourage others to visit or help.** Usually one visit will overcome a friend's discomfort and allow him or her to contribute further support. You might even be able to schedule some visitors, so that everyone does not come at once at the beginning or fails to come at all later on.
- **Accept silence.** If the mourner doesn't feel like talking, don't force conversation. Silence is better than aimless chatter. The mourner should be allowed to lead.
- **Be a good listener.** When suffering spills over into words, you can do the one thing the bereaved needs above all else at the time - you can listen. Is he emotional? Accept that. Does he cry? Accept that too. Is he angry with God? God will manage without your defending him. Accept whatever feelings are expressed. Do not rebuke. Do not change the subject. Be as understanding as you can be.
- **Do not attempt to tell the bereaved how he feels.** You can ask (without probing), but you cannot know, except as he tells you. Everyone, bereaved or not, resents an attempt to describe his feelings. To say, for example, "You must feel relieved now that he is out of pain," is presumptuous. Even to say, "I know how you feel," is questionable. *Learn* from the mourner, do not *instruct* him.

- **Do not probe for details about the death.** If the survivor offers information, listen with understanding.
- **Comfort children in the family.** Do not assume that a seemingly calm child is not sorrowing. If you can, be a friend to whom feelings can be confided and with whom tears can be shed. In most cases, incidentally, children should be left in the home and not shielded from the grieving of others.
- **Avoid talking to others about trivia in the presence of the recently bereaved.** Prolonged discussion of sports, weather, or stock market, for example, is resented, even if done purposely to distract the mourner.
- **Allow the "working through" of grief.** Do not whisk away clothing or hide pictures. Do not criticize seemingly morbid behavior. Young people may repeatedly visit the site of the fatal accident. A widow may sleep with her husband's pajamas as a pillow. A young child may wear his dead sibling's clothing.
- **Write a letter.** A sympathy card is a poor substitute for your own expression. If you take time to write of your love for and memories of the one who died, your letter might be read many times and cherished, possibly into the next generation.
- **Encourage the postponement of major decisions until after the period of intense grief.** Whatever can wait should wait.
- **In time, gently draw the mourner into quiet, outside activity.** He may not take the initiative to go out on his own.
- **When the mourner returns to social activity, treat him as a normal person.** Avoid pity - it destroys self-respect. Simple understanding is enough. Acknowledge the loss, the change in his life, but don't dwell on it.
- **Be aware of needed progress through grief.** If the mourner seems unable to resolve anger or guilt, for example, you might suggest a consultation with the clergyman or other trained counselor.
- **A final thought:** Helping must be more than following a few rules. Especially if the bereavement is devastating and you are closed to the bereaved, you may have to give more time, more care, *more of yourself* than you imagined. And you will have to perceive the *special needs* of your friend and creatively attempt to meet those needs. Such commitment and effort may even save a life. At the least, you will know the satisfaction of being truly and deeply helpful.

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The Compassionate Friends (TCF) is a national mutual assistance self-help organization offering support to families who have experienced the death of a child through nearly 600 local community chapters. For further information contact the national office.

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