



## Grief: Helping Someone Else in the Aftermath of Loss

In the wake of loss, it can be hard to take care those you care about who are grieving. As with self-care, there are many possible ways to offer support to someone who is grieving, and a variety of factors that affect how you can offer support, including the amount of time that has passed since the loss, your personality, the grieving person's personality, the nature of your relationship, your past experiences, and the amount of time and energy you may have to be a support. Here are a few strategies that may be helpful:

- *Approach rather than avoid the subject.* Sometimes friends, family, and coworkers can disappear after a loss, for many reasons, such as not knowing what to say, or worrying that they will say the wrong thing or overstep, or bring on more pain, feeling guilty for failing to stop what caused the suffering, or feeling like they can't do enough to make the person feel better, or that there's nothing they can say or do to make things better. Some people may see a person drowning in sorrow and then worry that they will be dragged under too.

If you're doubting your ability to help or feel inexperienced or worried that you'll say the wrong thing or make the person feel worse, don't let that get in the way of reaching out to let the person know you care. It's not possible to remind them what they're living with - they are aware of that every minute of every day. Even people who have endured the worst suffering often can benefit from practical assistance, being included in activities, or a simple conversation.

- *Say what is most helpful.* Two things people in pain commonly want to know are that they're not "crazy" to feel the way they do, and that they have support. Those who are grieving don't expect you to "fix" their pain but do need to know that you are with them in their suffering. You can say something like, "I know you have to be hurting, and maybe you don't know what will happen next, and neither do I. But you won't go through this alone. I/we will be there with you every step of the way." By saying some version of this, you acknowledge that the person is in a stressful and potentially scary situation.

Particularly if you are not close to the person, it may feel better to quickly say in passing, "I'm sorry for your loss!" or offering platitudes like, 'everything happens for a reason' or "it's going to be okay," which can leave a person wondering, "how do you know it is going to be okay?" But rather than trying that approach it can often be more helpful to simply acknowledge that the person is in pain and let them know you're there with them or for them. The message is, "I see you're suffering. And I care about you."

Instead of saying, "You will get through this," which may be hard to believe, let the person know that you're in it with them, by saying like, "We're here for you, whatever you need." Or you can send text messages, emails or cards with the message: "You are not alone," "I'm thinking of you," or, "We're here for you."

A survey of people who were grieving focused on what they felt was helpful and what was not, particularly soon after a loss. Direct expression of empathy/sympathy, acknowledgement that you do not know exactly what the bereaved person is going through but are thinking of them, not being afraid to talk about the deceased (including saying his or her name), offering practical support, and asking questions about how the death has affected the person were noted as helpful, whereas the following actions or statements were noted as *not helpful*:

- A casual or passive attitude.
- Statements that the death is in any way for the best or acceptable. (e.g., "He/she is in a better place," "It was his/her time to go," "It could be worse," or "It's God's will.")
- An assumption that the bereaved person is strong and will/should get through this.
- Any kind of avoidance of discussion of the death or the person who died.

If the grieving person conveys any of the above approaches, you can respectfully *acknowledge* the feeling or thought, but don't initiate statements like these yourself.

- *Ask questions.* Be an "opener." Openers ask a lot of questions and listen to the answers without judging. They enjoy learning about and feeling connected to others. Openers can make a big difference in times of crisis, especially for those who are normally reticent. In grief, some people don't want to dump their problems on others and may be unable to mention their grief unless people really press. Openers don't always have to be the closest of friends. People who have faced adversity tend to express more compassion toward others who are suffering. Grief is often discussed among "those who recognize in one another a kindred experience."

It's important to ask how the grieving person is doing with sincere interest, or it may come across as more of a standard greeting than a genuine question, and the person may not know how to respond to pleasantries. You can ask simple questions, like, "How are you today?" It shows that you are aware that a person is struggling to get through each day. It can be a short cut to express empathy and can also convey that the most intensive levels of grief might not be all- pervasive or permanent.

- *Offer empathy.* You may not feel comfortable asking questions or initiating a conversation with the grieving person, but you could send a text message with something simple like, "I know what you're going through must be really hard. I've been thinking about you." Offer empathy, or share personal stories, with the message that the person is not alone.
- *Offer a menu of options for support.* Rather than making assumptions about whether the person wants to talk, offer a menu of options and see if they take any of them. Again, you don't need to fix or stop the suffering. For some, simply showing up can make a huge difference. Say, "I'm here if you ever want to talk. Like now. Or later. Or in the middle of the night. Whatever would help you." In some circumstances, you can simply let the person know that if they need you in any way, they can call you at any time. Just knowing it's an option to call at any time may be enough for the person to feel better, even if they never

take you up on the offer.

In other situations, you might sincerely ask, "Is there anything I can do?" but the person does not have an answer. Or maybe they know of things that would be helpful but it's hard for them to ask for those things because they feel like it would be too much of an imposition. So asking if you can do anything may unintentionally shift the obligation to the grieving person. It may be more helpful for you to proactively jump in with some practical or supportive action, sometimes before the person even realizes that they need it. Rather than offering to do 'anything,' just do something (i.e., mowing the lawn, picking up family, holding the person's hand, bringing food, texting, "What do you NOT want on a burger?"). Make a choice for the person but give them a sense of control. Specific acts help because instead of trying to fix the problem, they mitigate the aftereffects of the problem. Most importantly, show up over and over, and make it clear that you will always be there when the person needs you.

- *Be genuine and persistent.* Grieving can come in waves, be worse on anniversaries or holidays, and can last a long time. Continue to check in with the person regularly. Make sure you make regular efforts to convince the person that you truly want to help, so they don't feel like a burden (i.e., "I won't be able to rest unless I know you're okay." "I call often because the only time I feel okay is when I'm talking to you." "I'll sit here with you watching television every night until I know you're back"). In this instance, caring means that when someone is hurting, you cannot imagine being anywhere else. Many who grieve find that they really appreciate contact months later, when most interest has dropped off, especially on anniversaries or holidays that remind them of their loss. A text, call, card, or email can be a much-needed reminder that even over time, they are not alone.

As the worst of the grief fades, the person may feel the need to restore balance in their friendships, so they don't feel one-sided. They may want those close to them to know they are there to help carry their troubles too. Make sure you allow this shift and let them offer help or assistance in other ways, so that they benefit from feeling like they have something to contribute to the friendship.

- *Be sensitive to unique factors that affect the person.* There's no one way to grieve and there's no one way to comfort. It's hard to understand, or even imagine, another person's pain. When we're not in a physically or emotionally intense state, we often underestimate its impact. What helps one person won't help another. And what helps a person one day might not help the same person the next day. When someone is suffering, instead of following the Golden Rule, follow the Platinum Rule, which is: treat others as *they* want to be treated. Take your cues from the person and respond with understanding or action that maps onto their needs.

Being a friend may mean both comforting grief and also dealing with other emotions, like anger, or the mental and physical impacts of grief, such as lower functioning or sickness. Let the person know that even if they feel like they are difficult to be around, you will not abandon them.

Some specific factors might interfere with open discussion. Speaking up can strengthen social bonds, but in some cases it's risky if a person feels pressure to be a representative of any kind of population or community (i.e., male, female, first responder, Veteran, single parent, millennial). They may feel less able to be free with their communication because of past generalizations, pressures, or stigma that has been imposed upon them by themselves or others. Often breaking the silence about these generalizations or expectations can bring people closer together.

- *Help challenge the person.* Some people might need to be reminded that they still need to set and achieve ambitious goals at work. Challenging someone could backfire, but if you know the person well enough, blunt encouragement like this might provide a needed jolt of confidence and remind them that they could fail by failing to try. For people who are hard on themselves, remind them that even when they give themselves a low rating for the situation itself, they can still earn a high rating for how they deal with it.

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## Self-Care:

There are many different ways to take care of oneself during grieving, which may vary depending on a variety of factors, including the amount of time since the death, your personality, your history, your relationship with the person who died, and the context of your life in the wake of the death. Here are a few strategies that have been noted by others to mitigate or reduce grief over time. Not all of them are necessary or appropriate for everyone, but they may provide some possible options for self-care.

### *Social Processes:*

- *Reach out to mentors.* The most helpful support often comes from those who have suffered similar losses. They understand because they have been through similar experiences. Instead of saying, "I'm sorry for your loss," they might say that they went through something similar and let you know how they got through it. Or you can see that they've gotten through it. Or just being with them may feel comforting. They may not have to say many words, but you still feel understood via the kinship of shared or similar experiences.
- *Reach out to your closest friends.* As people get older, they typically focus on a smaller set of meaningful relationships, and the quality of friendships becomes a more important factor in happiness than the quantity. But not everyone feels comfortable talking openly about personal tragedy. We all make our own choices about when, where, and if we want to express our feelings. However, evidence suggests that opening up about traumatic or loss events can improve mental and physical health and can help you understand your own emotions and feel understood, rather than isolated.
- *Be clear and authentic when others reach out to you.* You can make changes in your actions to make better connections with the people you choose to be more authentic with. For instance, if you automatically answer the question "How are you?" with "Fine," it doesn't encourage the people you're close with to ask further questions. If you don't give a true response the other person may not feel comfortable pushing for one. If you do think it would be helpful to be more authentic with someone, to get better support from them, instead of saying "I'm fine," you could say something like, "I'm not fine, but I appreciate you asking and it's nice to be able to be honest about that with you." Let them know when you may want to avoid more authentic conversations at some point, when the timing is right, you do want to talk more in-depth with them about how you are. You can tell them the best times and ways to reach out, such as in person, over the phone, over food, or by text. You can also tell them that it's okay for them to ask you questions or talk about how they feel too, especially if they seem to be feeling paralyzed when you're around, worrying that they might say the wrong thing.

### *Mental Processes:*

- *Focus on how sadness or despair will feel less acute with time.* Studies reveal that we tend to overestimate how long negative events will affect us, but most people who have lived through tragedy say that over time the sadness subsides.
- *Focus on the moments when the pain temporarily eases up.* Learn that no matter how sad you feel, another break will eventually come. It can help you regain a sense of control.
- *Focus on being realistic.* Words like "never" and "always" are signs of permanence, which can make recovery more difficult. Try to reduce the words "never" and "always" and replace them with "sometimes" and "lately." "I will *always* feel this awful" becomes "I will *sometimes* feel this awful."

- *Focus on reality.* Instead of being surprised by the negative feelings, plan for, or “lean into” them, rather than feeling down that you are down, or grief-stricken that you are grief-stricken, or anxious that you are anxious. Admit that you cannot control when the sadness comes. Take “feeling breaks” and stop fighting those moments, and you may find that they pass more quickly.
- *Focus on acceptance.* We all deal with loss: jobs lost, loves lost, lives lost. The question is not whether these things will happen. They will, and we will have to face them. Resilience comes from analyzing how we process grief and from simply accepting that grief. Sometimes we have less control than we think. Other times we have more. Accept that aging, sickness, and loss are inevitable. It lessens our pain because we end up “making friends with our own fears.”
- *Focus on worst-case scenarios.* Rather than trying to find positive thoughts, think about how much worse things could be. Find other things to be grateful about, which research has shown can increase happiness and health by reminding us of the good in other areas of life.
- *Focus on changing beliefs that don't serve you.* For instance, consider that the way you typically respond to offers of help from people might need to change in some circumstances. Some people hate asking for help, hate needing it, or worry that they will be a burden to everyone. They may define friendship by what *they* can offer, such as advice, support, or practical help. If you are like this, you may need to change this pattern when grieving. Rather than focusing on feeling like a burden, you may need to reframe your thought that *friendship isn't only what you can give, it's what you're able to receive*. And by receiving it, you can better give back to others going through similar situations in the future.
- *Focus on honoring.* Find a way to honor the loss. Writing or creating a ritual can help you feel connected to the person, give his/her life continuing meaning, and allow you to live in a way that honors and reaffirms your relationship, instead of cutting ties, “getting over it,” and moving on with your life. Once the initial shock of grief wears off, many bereaved people realize that the best way to pay tribute to their loved ones is not through their own pain and suffering, not through their own metaphorical death, but by living on as fully as possible, or by living as the other person would want them to live.
- *Focus on philosophy/religion/or values.* This can help you gain a broader view, gain a sense that you or your loved ones are looked after, and feel connected to a greater power. For example, for some people, turning to God gives them a sense of being enveloped in grace that is eternal and ultimately strong. Or it may result in the realization that you are connected to something much larger than yourself or connected to a universal human experience.
- *Focus on healing.* If you continue to experience debilitating or highly distressing feelings of grief, post-traumatic symptoms, or depression, consider talking to someone who specializes in prolonged or traumatic grief. There are evidence-based treatments that can give ongoing support and guidance to learn to correct unhelpful thoughts and beliefs, find positive coping strategies, and gain meaning from the loss. Treatment can help you find ways to honor and maintain positive memories of the person/people you lost, work towards accepting the death, manage emotions like anger or avoidance, resume normal day-to-day life, and look forward to a better future.

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### **For Managers / Leaders**

The workplace is often a place where people turn to others when they are dealing with something.

However, grief can affect everything we value at work: control, growth, productivity, connections. People have two instinctive responses to death. One is to grieve and feel the pain and be sad. The other is to survive, to get on with it, and not be defeated by death. As a part of this response, some will long to get back to work as a respite from grieving, or as a reminder that there is one part of life or they still have some control. Others may need more time for practical reasons or because they are more overwhelmed by the grief. As a manager or leader, you can help employees handle both responses.

The norm following loss is often to leave the grieving person alone for a few days and then hope they'll return expediently to work. But this approach can deprive them of the support they might need. High work demands, as well as stigma associated with suffering are often the reasons for this approach, particularly in places where employees feel there is an expectation to "keep it together". If people who are grieving become isolated as a result of this approach, the natural withdrawal that accompanies mourning is more intense and lasting and can result in eroded performance in the short term and diminished commitment and loyalty to the organization in a long term.

If you can build a relationship of trust with a grieving person, you can be a strong source of support, and the loyalty you'll get, and the level of work, may far outweigh the impact of grief on work productivity. Strong time off policies, flexibility, and open conversations make a big difference. Here are a few ways to help:

*Be flexible.* Those grieving will experience both progressions and regressions in focus and productivity after a loss. Acknowledging the loss without making demands during the regressions helps. Let the person take the lead and ignore the impulse to fix. Be present and support the person by managing the boundary between them and the workplace. If possible, allow remote working, a shift to a less demanding role, or flexible work hours. You may also consider offering an extension of or an opt-out of an evaluation, along with regular reviews to discuss how the person is coping and whether further accommodations are needed. Flexibility helps people benefit from the structure of returning to work without being overwhelmed.

*Show support.* People are touched by simple things in the aftermath of loss, especially by leaders, and you will see what is most useful if you just pay attention. Your demonstration of support is a signal that the workplace cares. This can be done in the most fitting way for you, your organizational culture, and the grieving person (i.e., a phone call, text, personal visitor, sending flowers or a card, attending the memorial service).

*Ask questions.* If possible, follow the person's lead in terms of what they prefer in terms of time off, support, assistance, and mentoring. You can also ask what they would like you to tell others at work, or how they would like their colleagues to respond when they return.

*Inform.* Be open with the person about what the policy is for returning to work and whether it might be flexible. Those who are grieving often long for clarity, and clarity around work policies and options can give structure and routine in a time when a person is feeling out of control.

There is no formula for when to return to work, it depends on your work policies and requirements. If the existing policies do not feel like enough, consider supplementing them with strategies like leave sharing options that allow employees to donate vacation time to those in need, or an employee assistance fund to help workers cover funeral or other expenses. But ultimately, patience and support are what make the difference.

*Communicate with others.* When an employee is ready to return to work, you can play an important role in preparing coworkers, through communication about the returning employee's wishes and perhaps education about how to deal with grief.

*Be patient.* Depending on the many factors, grief can remain intense for months, and can also flare up years later. The person may continue to experience periods of intense confusion, exhaustion, and pain. They may go back-and-forth between feeling pain and wanting to move on. They throw themselves into work one moment, and the next moment feeling like they can't function at all. The person may want to return to normal but feel that it is not possible. If you realize and convey that grief can destabilize a person's focus, abilities, and consistency, and can be normal for some time after a loss, rather than sign that a person has lost interest in work, you can reduce a good deal of misunderstanding and conflict.

*Believe in the person.* People are very self-critical when they are grieving, especially those who have been very successful at work. A grieving person will benefit if you continue to believe in them while not putting too much pressure on them. It requires the capacity to listen and to offer permission to be both a functioning employee and a grief-stricken human being at the same time. It can be a relief for the person to see that you hold them in the same regard as before but can tailor your expectations as needed. It might also affect the way they view themselves.

*Advise and refer.* If an employee continues to struggle several months after a loss, it may be helpful to advise them to seek help from a professional. An inability to sustain regular work duties six months after a loss may be a symptom of complicated or prolonged grief, and there are effective evidence-based treatments that can reduce suffering and speed up recovery.

*Track and facilitate progress.* An experience of grief can lead to deeper connections with others, greater authenticity, a shift in values, and the realization that one is stronger, and that life is worth living. You can support this process through your interest in what the person might be discovering about their changes in life and work. Especially if a person is feeling guilt about new ways of feeling and seeing life, listen and support them as they craft a new way forward, speak about your own experiences with adversity or loss, or be open to asking about the person's experiences over time.

Your role as a manager in helping employees with grief can help employees feel supported and work towards recovery, have a ripple effect on other employees who see the care you take with the grieving person, help employees remain in their roles, and bring out the best in your workers.

## For Families

Here are a few ways that families can help deal with grief:

- Family members, friends, and colleagues can capture their memories of the person who died on video, so when their children are ready, they will learn about their parent from those who loved the person. Children can be videotaped sharing their own memories, so that as they grow up, they will know which memories of the person are truly theirs. When they're worried about forgetting about the person, they can watch the video.
- Share stories about how the family sticks together through good times and bad, to allow kids to feel that they are connected to something larger than themselves. These discussions help children make sense of their past and embrace challenges.
- After people reflect on an event, they often find life more meaningful and become inspired to create a better future. Rather than ignoring painful past milestones, mark them in the present.
- Write letters to the one who has died and send them up in balloons.
- Don't be afraid to tell stories about the person who died.
- Create a new family identity so children feel that the people left make a complete unit. Looking at photos of the family can help children integrate family memories and events.
- Set aside time for the new family unit to have fun together. Interactive activities give kids a break from grief and helps them feel like they're part of a whole family again. Make them a weekly tradition.
- Children have limits to how much intense emotion they can process at once. They have shorter "feeling spans"; their grief comes more in bursts than in sustained periods. They also sometimes express their grief through behavior changes and play rather than in words. The research suggests that it's important to teach children the following points:
  - Respect their feelings and not try to suppress them
  - It's okay to be sad and that they can take breaks from any activity to cry
  - Feeling deep grief means you get upset much more easily. It's okay to be angry. Expect that it will happen, and when anger flares, apologize quickly so that you forgive each other and yourselves.
  - It's okay to say to anyone that they do not want to talk about it now
  - To know that they did not deserve this
  - Sleep matters even more in adversity because we need to marshal all our strength
  - It's okay to be happy and to laugh.
  - It's important to be kind to themselves.
  - You will work together as a team to not always dwell on yesterday's grief, so you can approach today as a new day.
  - Asking for help is at the heart of building resilience. They are not alone and can gain some control by reaching out for support.
  - Pain is not permanent; things can get better.

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