

LIVES



5 PERSPECTIVES

Extending Sympathy

The next time you send condolences, look to these simple ways to help a loved one navigate grief.

BY SHARLENE BREAKEY

Photograph by Ted + Chelsea Cavanaugh

1

Don't scroll past the sad stuff.

It's beautiful to see how people use social media to mourn a loss. A grieving person usually posts in a moment when they need connection, so a simple "like" or a hug reaction can help. The only thing you can do wrong is ignore this kind of post. Too often we worry that we have nothing profound to say, but that's not necessary on social media. Every comment is a small connection—like a hand extended, a pat on the back, or an understanding smile.

TAMARA WANDEL, PHD, IS A PROFESSOR OF COMMUNICATION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF EVANSVILLE.

2

Embrace the discomfort.

According to Jewish wisdom, it's our responsibility to help the stranger. A "stranger" is really anyone who is vulnerable, whether after the loss of a loved one or because of an injustice. Vulnerability tends to make everyone uncomfortable, so I counsel people to honor the discomfort. Sitting in that feeling makes it easier to call someone after their parent dies, or to be with a friend who's received a grim diagnosis. The second thing is to be quiet. What people need more than words is your presence. Be an active listener, even if the talk is about nothing more than baseball. And don't worry about not having answers to big questions, like "Why did this happen?" You just need to show you understand the question.

ELIANNA YOLKUT IS A RABBI AND COHOST OF THE PODCAST *NOT YOUR JEWISH MOTHER*.

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3

Consider sympathy fuel for your soul.

People often see the act of extending sympathy as a draining experience, but it actually fills you up. And it's much easier to be a comfort than most of us realize. You can say you made a stew and want to send some of it over. Or mail a present without asking what your friend needs. Having been on the receiving end, I can tell you it's always a delight to be surprised with hand lotion or some silly stationery. To me, extending sympathy is one of our few real superpowers.

KATE BOWLER, PHD, IS A HISTORIAN AT DUKE DIVINITY SCHOOL AND THE AUTHOR OF *NO CURE FOR BEING HUMAN*.

4

Send no-pressure invitations.

Something that changes your life in a moment—like my husband's cancer diagnosis—upends your identity. So it helps when friends remind you who you are with calls or texts. Just be sure to relieve the grieving person of any pressure to respond. That means saying, "I'm here if you want to take a break and get a pedicure, but there's no need to reply if it's not a good time."

LUCY KALANITHI, MD, IS A CLINICAL ASSOCIATE PROFESSOR AT STANFORD UNIVERSITY SCHOOL OF MEDICINE AND THE HOST OF THE PODCAST *GRAVITY*.

5

Lean into the reality of life.

Our app is based on Bhutanese folk wisdom: To be happy, one must contemplate death five times each day. The idea is that because we humans are so death phobic, we constantly push away thoughts of our demise, but that's actually harder than contemplating our mortality. Leaning into the reality of what human life is—great joys and great difficulties alike—can help us be better friends when someone is facing death or serious illness. It helps to realize that one day we'll be where that suffering person is. That makes it easier to move from sympathy to action.

HANSA BERGWALL COCREATED THE *WECROAK* APP AND *WECROAK* PODCAST, WHICH EXPLORES THE SUBJECT OF DEATH.