

How to help a grieving person

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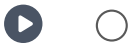


For those dealing with loss, presence tends to matter more than the perfect words.

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When someone we care about is grieving the death of a loved one, many of us want to help but are unsure how. We're afraid of saying the wrong thing or somehow overstepping. So instead, we keep our distance or resort to timid clichés. But experts say doing something, even imperfectly, is far better than doing nothing at all.

Here's how to offer support in ways that are truly impactful.

Don't try to fix it

Using phrases such as “everything happens for a reason” or “they're in a better place” tends to shut down dialogue. Those kinds of comments can be about managing our own discomfort, rather than offering support, says Rebecca Soffer, co-founder and chief executive of [Modern Loss](#), an online platform and community focused on grief. Soffer herself lost both of her parents in her early 30s and now writes the website's popular [Substack newsletter on loss](#).

“We like to think that it’s our job to take away someone’s pain, but we don’t have that ability. It’s really about making it clear that we see them, that we care,” she says. “Say: ‘I’m so sorry that you’re going through something so hard. I wish I had the perfect thing to say, but I don’t. Can I invite you for a coffee? Can we go for a walk around the block?’ ”

Ashley Mielke, a registered psychologist in Edmonton specializing in grief and trauma, also says that grief is not something that can be fixed. “It’s not a problem to be solved or something to be intellectualized,” she says. “Sit with them in the muck and validate their feelings.” In other words, presence matters more than carefully crafted words. As Mielke puts it, “We don’t heal in isolation.”

Be pro-active

Many people default to telling a grieving person: “Let me know what you need.” It’s a nice sentiment, but best skipped altogether. “Their nervous system is overwhelmed,” Mielke says. “Asking what they need doesn’t help because it puts the burden back on the grieving person, who doesn’t know what they need.”

Instead, take initiative by dropping off groceries, prepping a meal or helping with child care. “For most people, life doesn’t just stop. They have a career and a household to run. How can we remove the burden of the day-to-day tasks?”

Jordana Mednick, a Toronto-based entrepreneur who lost her mother in 2018, says, “I hate the question, ‘What can I do?’ Just do it.” When her mom passed away, she remembers friends stepping up with extra carpool drives or distracting her children, then 6 and 9, with outings such as dinner and a movie.

Her friends were also instrumental in helping prepare her home for *shiva*, the Jewish mourning period observed after a funeral. The support left such

an impression that Mednick recently launched Neshama, an online platform that helps Jewish communities in Toronto and Montreal co-ordinate the logistics of mourning.

Think beyond the casserole

Bringing a home-cooked meal to someone in mourning is always appreciated, but don't be afraid to get creative. Mednick says she was especially grateful for thoughtful gestures such as a sushi dinner one night or a Starbucks gift card left on her doorstep. "It made my life easier," she recalls. Her mother loved yellow tulips, which she once mentioned in passing to a close friend. That friend dropped off yellow tulips after the mourning period and continues to do so whenever Mednick is having a hard time. "It always brings me back to my mom," she says.

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Keep showing up

Support shouldn't stop after the funeral. "What grieving people tend to remember most is not the perfect thing someone said, it's the person who kept showing up," Soffer says. After Soffer's mother was killed in a car accident, her friends organized a weekly schedule to take responsibility for checking in, making plans or stopping by. Eventually, that evolved into a monthly Sunday brunch club, a ritual that the group has continued for years.

"Some weeks where I didn't know where to hang my sanity, I'd think, 'Okay, brunch is on Sunday, just four more days,'" Soffer recalls. She suggests setting calendar reminders to check in on grieving friends in the weeks, months and even years after a loss, especially around birthdays, holidays and death anniversaries. Just as grief doesn't disappear after the shock wears off, neither should support.

Say their name

It's human nature to be afraid of saying the wrong thing, which explains why many people shy away from mentioning a deceased person's name. In most cases, however, hearing the person's name, or a memory you have of them, is incredibly meaningful. As Soffer says: "You're not reminding them of something painful. They're already living through it everyday, so you're reminding them that they're not alone."

Though it's been nearly a decade since her mother passed away, Mednick still appreciates when people share stories about her. A family friend recently spoke with Mednick about how her mom loved to cook, and that he still has various recipes written in her distinct handwriting. "Memories came flooding back," she says. "It was really warm and comforting to me."

If you don't have any memories to share, simply ask about the person who has died. Try saying something along the lines of, "Tell me about their gifts and talents" or "What do you miss the most?" For many grieving people, knowing their loved one is remembered can be the most comforting thing of all.

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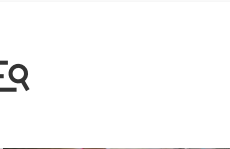
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