11 Ways to Comfort Someone Who's Grieving

If you have a friend or relative who is grieving, it can be hard to know how to console him or her. If it seems that nothing you can do or say helps, don't give up. You can't take the pain away, but your presence is more important than it seems. Accept that you can't fix the situation or make your friend or relative feel better. Instead just be present and offer hope and a positive outlook toward the future. Accept that the person's grieving will be a gradual process.

It is sometimes difficult to know what to say to a bereaved person. If you find yourself tongue-tied or uncertain of what to do in the face of someone's loss, here are some steps you might try.

1. **Name names.** Don't be afraid to mention the deceased. It won't make your friend any sadder, although it may prompt tears. It's terrible to feel that someone you love must forever be expunged from memory and conversation. (This suggestion does not apply in cultures in which mentioning the dead is taboo or bad luck, however.)
2. **Offer hope.** People who have gone through grieving often remember that it is the person who offered reassuring hope, the certainty that things will get better, who helped them make the gradual passage from pain to a renewed sense of life.
3. **Make phone calls.** Call to express your sympathy. Try to steer clear of such phrases as "It's God's will" or "It's for the best" unless the bereaved person says this first. Your friend or relative may need you even more after the first few weeks and months, when other people may stop calling.
4. **Write a note.** If you had a relationship with the deceased, try to include a warm, caring or funny anecdote that shows how important to you he or she was. If you didn't know the deceased, offer your sympathy and assure the bereaved that he or she is in your thoughts or prayers.
5. **Help out.** Be specific when offering help. Volunteer to shop or do laundry, bring dinner, pass on information about funeral arrangements, or answer the phone. Pitch in to clean up the kitchen. A lawyer might volunteer to help with the estate. A handy person might button up the house as winter approaches.
6. **Be sensitive to differences.** People mourn and grieve in different ways. Religion plays a big role in how death is treated; so do ethnic, cultural and family backgrounds. Avoid criticizing the funeral arrangements or memorial service. Also, try not to impose your beliefs about death on your friend.
7. **Make a date.** Ask your friend to join you for a walk or meal once a week. Be aware that weekends are often very difficult, and suggest an activity. Low-stress activities may be best: watch a video at home together versus going out to a movie. Sometimes just being there without saying much is enough — it may even be exactly what your friend wants.
8. **Listen well instead of advising.** A sympathetic ear is a wonderful thing. A friend who listens even when the same story is told with little variation is even better. Often, people work through grief and trauma by telling their story over and over. Unless you are asked for your advice, don't be quick to offer it.
9. **Express your feelings.** If you share your friend's sorrow, say so. It's even all right to blurt out that you don't know what to say. Most likely, nothing you say will turn the tide, but your sympathetic presence may make your friend feel slightly less alone. (One caveat: try not to express your feelings so emphatically that your friend has to take care of you.)
10. **Handle anger gently.** People who are grieving sometimes direct angry feelings toward the closest target. If that happens to be you, try to be understanding. That is, wait until well after the person has cooled down before raising your concern in a nonthreatening way.
11. **Keep your promises.** If you offer to do anything, follow through. This is especially important where promises to children are involved. Losing a loved one is abandonment enough.

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