

Transitions

A Newsletter for friends and family who grieve

Grief in a Time of COVID-19 – VOLUME TWO 2021

The Gravity of Grief **How to Support a Grieving Friend**

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Note: This issue of the Transitions newsletter is intended as a general guide for offering support to a grieving friend. A (pdf) version of this and other articles about coping with the death of a loved one can be downloaded, printed, or shared with others electronically by visiting the NorthShore Hospice website:

<https://www.northshore.org/hospice/bereavement-grief-counseling/>

“It’s going to hurt really bad for a while, and I’m not going anywhere. I’m here. This year it’s your turn; next year, it might be mine. We’ll all get through this together.”
– Max Strom

The origin of the words grief and *gravity* come from the same Latin root, *gravis*, which means a “heavy burden.” As a friend of someone who is grieving, I’m sure you understand you can’t take their burden away. However, there are real and concrete ways you can help to lighten their load.

Grieving in a time of COVID-19 adds additional stressors to an already heavy burden, the magnitude of which we are only beginning to

realize. As the summer unfolds, and many of the memorial services and celebrations of life that were delayed because of the social distancing guidelines are now taking place, you will want to be particularly attentive to your grieving friend as many of the thoughts and emotions hidden all these months behind face masks and kept behind closed doors, may surprise us in their intensity when finally given the opportunity to be expressed.

The Elephant in the Room

Grief is often the elephant in the room that nobody talks about. Most of the time, it ends up sitting on the chest of the bereaved, making it nearly impossible for them to breathe. It is understandable if you’re feeling awkward because you’re unsure about what to do or say. Our society doesn’t do a very good job at offering us guidance on how to support a grieving friend and because we come from so many different cultures and belief

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systems it's not always clear how to offer words of condolence. After a few mumbled, obligatory words of sympathy, most people are afraid they aren't going to say the right thing, so they error on the side of not saying anything at all.

Additionally, as time moves forward, people generally don't mention the name of the person who died because they are afraid it might make the bereaved person upset or cry. The problem with this strategy, of course, is that in addition to grief, your friend also ends up feeling abandoned at a time when they need a community of support the most.

In truth, silence is often the first and most appropriate response, but it requires you to be in the "room" and emotionally present to a wide range of memories and emotions, ready, should they need one, to offer a hug or a hand to hold. To be a friend requires more than just a sympathy card. It means understanding that your friend's grief will not follow a predictable set of stages or timeline but will unfold in ways as unique as they are, and your task is to remain available to support them for an extended period of time.

Now I'm going to tell you what NOT to say

Do not say: "He's in a better place." "You need to be strong." "God wanted another angel in Heaven." "Look on the bright side, at least she's not suffering anymore." "You should be grateful you had him for so long." "Are you going to sell the house?" "Now you can focus on yourself." "When you're ready, I know someone I can fix you u

with." "It's been six months; it's time to move on with your life." (If you did say something like this, it's not too late to say, "I'm sorry, I didn't realize what I said was wrong.")

Instead, these are some things you might say

Make honest, "I" statements. "I love you." "I am going to miss him too." "I admired her so much." "I am here for you." "I can't begin to imagine what you are going through." "I am so sorry for your loss; my heart breaks for you."

The bereaved tell me they find great comfort in knowing that others are also thinking about the deceased person. So, use their name in conversation. Tell stories. Reminisce about the good times. Acknowledge that you miss him or her too.

It isn't your job to cheer them up or offer unsolicited advice

Contemporary America seems to be obsessed with the pursuit of happiness, staying upbeat and positive. In most situations, that's okay, but not in this case. The thing is, they are supposed to be sad right now. They just lost one of the most, if not the most, important person in their life. Profound sadness is an appropriate response. Rethink any sentence that begins with, "You should ...," and ends with, "it will make you feel better."

Don't assume you know what they need, and don't expect them to know either, but as people get vaccinated, and the weather improves, invite them to socialize one-on-one or in small groups with you anyway. When they accept

an invitation, give them the option to back out at the last minute or change their mind. They may not want to go to a party at your house to celebrate anything, let alone the Fourth of July. They certainly don't want to be stuck at the end of the table for any occasion with crazy uncle Charlie. Who would? Understand that wherever they go, and no matter how much fun they may have had, more often than not, they are probably going home to an empty house. Isolation and silence can be suffocation.

Validation and Consolation

Instead of considering, "What can I do to cheer them up?" Think in terms of two things, validation and consolation.

Validation means they have a right to their own thoughts and feelings. The word *lost*, does not mean that the deceased was accidentally misplaced like a wallet or cellphone. Its origins are in the word *bereft*, the root word being *bērafian* which means "to have been robbed," as in, the loved one was stolen away or kidnapped, and there isn't enough ransom money in the world to bring them back. Can you imagine how mind-rending that must be?

Consequently, grief often stirs up feelings of unfairness and injustice, of fear and anxiety, of hopelessness, meaninglessness, and it can undermine their sense of self-confidence and identity. Many bereaved also have feelings of guilt over things said or done in the stressful moments of caregiver strain and a lingering sense of shame for feeling relieved

that their own long-suffering is over.

May I also remind you, not everyone had a mutually life-giving relationship. You may know some of the features of their relational dynamics but do not assume you know the whole story. Some people may not have been all that close to the person who died; others (in fact, I'd say the majority of people) genuinely loved the person who died, but they may not be entirely "broken up" after all. That's okay.

Your friend may or may not feel any of the emotions mentioned above. Whatever the emotion, your job is not to try to convince them otherwise but to acknowledge the emotion as valid to their situation. It's not right or wrong, good or bad; it just is. No one is in a position to judge unless they have been to hell and back in their shoes.

Consolation is perhaps the most important word in my vocabulary, and I hope it will soon be for you as well. In the context of grief, I avoid using words like *closure*, *healing*, *recovery*, *resolution*, and especially *acceptance*. All of these words suggest the goal is to get over it, or at some point be done with grief, and "move on" with life. Actually, I'd like to suggest that you think of grief as *episodic*. That means it comes, and it goes like waves. While your friend will need to find way to "carry on" without that special person by their side, they are allowed to miss those chosen few they've given access to their heart – forever!

So, if the goal is not to help them resolve their grief and come to some

imaginary place called acceptance, then our task in supporting your friend is to help them find ways to experience comfort and consolation in the present moment. You may not be able to take their burden away, but you can be a soothing balm that at least provides some temporary relief to the aching muscle that resides deep within their chest.

Consolation can come in many forms. Your ability to provide consolation will depend on at least two factors: 1. Your unique relationship, temperament, and availability to support your friend, and 2. the dynamic, ever-evolving nature of their grief.

Friends come with different gifts: 1. Some people are good listeners, 2. Some people can help in practical ways, and 3. Some people can provide us with an opportunity to set our burdens aside for a little while and just breathe. Listeners do just that; they listen, providing a much-needed forum for emotional expression. Helpers usually aren't that great with the emotional stuff, but they can fix things, mow the lawn, do the dishes and other household chores, or help with more complicated things like filing income taxes. Finally, some people aren't all that great at either of the above, but they can provide us with the opportunity to relax and forget about grief for a while. Your challenge is to make an honest self-assessment and consider which type of friend you are able to be in the context of your own life circumstances. Do not offer support that you are unable to provide. Never say, "If there is

anything I can do, just call." That's a cop-out. Be thoughtful, be specific and be consistent. Here are a few suggestions:

Emotional Support

- "I can listen" (without judgment, without trying to cheer you up, or fix it.)
- "I can surprise you with an, I'm Thinking of You note periodically over the next year."
- "I can call you regularly, once a day or once a week."
- "I can pray for you," (or) "hold you in my heart."

Practical Help

- "I can help address Thank You notes."
- "I can do a household project or mow the lawn."
- "I can help you sort through that pile of paperwork."
- "I can provide a casserole for the freezer, a hot, heart-healthy meal, or a sweet treat."

A Time Out

- "I can babysit, pet sit or house sit when you need to take a break."
- "I can watch a movie with you or take you out for dinner."
- "I can pay for a trip to the day spa for both of us."
- "I can just hang out with you; we don't even have to talk."

For the long-haul

Most people who come to see me have an underlying fear that they will get "stuck" in their grief. In reality, it is only a tiny fraction of the population who will develop what is sometimes described as "complicated grief." So the chances of your friend getting stuck are

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relatively small. We have learned a lot about why some people seem unable to re-engage with life after a loss, and we've discovered it has less to do with the degree of relationship or depth of the loss and more to do with a conspiracy of preexisting issues that are aggravated by the death of that significant other.

Honestly, I feel for you, friend, because those folks are seldom willing to come to see someone like me. Instead, you're the one who is actually in the stuck place because someone you care about is suffering, and you feel powerless to help.

Setting aside labels like stuck or complicated grief, I feel compelled

to say "Thank you," and emphasize that you provide what psychologist, Robert Kegan, calls "natural therapy." His point is that you are part of a network of people who naturally provide a holding environment, not just in times of crisis or transition, but in simply living out the day-to-day joys and sorrows of life on this planet. When a loved one dies, we lose a primary support, so it is all the more important for the rest of the community to rally around the one who needs holding. There are occasions when I may be called upon to supplement the kind of help you are able to provide, but I always remind my clients, "You can't call me at ten o'clock at night, so make a list of those you can, and keep it by the phone."

They will eventually get through the really rough spots and possibly even discover an inner strength (from all this heavy burden lifting) they never knew they had. The support you and others provide will also help them create new memories and find hope for the future. There will be moments beyond the first year, especially on birthdays, anniversaries, and holidays when you can anticipate they may experience the gravity of grief all over again. Make a note on your calendar of their important dates, and remember to send your friend an, "I'm thinking of you" note, email, or phone call. You can remind them as Max Strom suggests, that in relationships, we take turns. The truth is, someday, they will be presented the opportunity to return the favor.