

SOMEONE YOU CARE ABOUT IS GRIEVING

Tips for Supporting Them



YOU'RE LIKELY READING THIS BECAUSE SOMEONE YOU CARE ABOUT IS GRIEVING.

You might be wondering what to do and say — or — not do or say. Grief is confusing for the person who is grieving, but also for the people in their lives who want to show up and provide support that is *actually* supportive. Just as you might not be sure what to do or say, people who are grieving might not know what they need or have the energy to articulate what would be helpful. This is why the phrase, “Let me know if I can do anything,” might be hard to hear. And — if you’ve already said it, don’t worry. Almost everyone has at some point in their life.

The suggestions in this Tip Sheet are rooted in the stories we’ve heard from parents, caregivers, and other adults grieving the death of someone in their world.

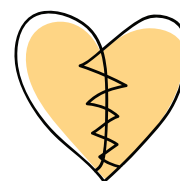
They’ve shared the words and actions from others that were helpful — and some that were not so helpful.

Grief is as unique as we are, so not all these ideas will be a good fit for the person you care about. Pick what you think might be helpful. You can even show this Tip Sheet to your person and ask them which ideas might work well for them.

WHEN WE SAY “GRIEF,” WHAT DO WE MEAN?

Grief is a natural, normal, and multifaceted response to any kind of loss. Grief gets stereotyped as purely emotional, but in reality, it impacts people on every level: physical, emotional, cognitive, social, spiritual, and behavioral. In other words, it goes beyond just being sad. It can affect how we feel in our bodies, our capacity for being around others, what we can accomplish in a day, how we feel about our lives moving forward, and so much more.

To learn more about grief and being grief-informed, check out [“Being Grief-Informed: From Understanding to Action”](#) or visit dougy.org/UnderstandGrief.



#UnderstandGrief

Grief also looks different for everyone and can be shaped by a person’s age, relationship with the person who died, gender, culture, ethnicity, spirituality or religious beliefs, and everything else that goes into the unique constellation of their identity and background. As long as they aren’t hurting themselves or someone else, you can best help your family member or friend by validating and supporting how they are experiencing and expressing their grief.

WHERE TO START?

The best first step is to put down your toolbox. Your person doesn’t need you to fix them or their grief because grief is to feel, not fix ([watch this TED Talk for more](#)). What they most likely need are people who will show up, consistently and over

the long term. When someone dies, there can be a rush to support the family in the first few days and even weeks, but soon after, people often retreat to their own lives. Even those with the best intentions sometimes avoid the person who is grieving because they don't know what to do or say. Death and grief can make people uncomfortable, so there's a good chance your friend is having to deal with other people's feelings and reactions to their grief. You can make a difference by being a friend who can listen without making it about you.

CHECKING IN

The question, *How are you?* can be hard to answer for anyone, but especially when someone is grieving. Reaching out is important because it helps people feel less alone, so here are several other options:

Ask how they are in a more specific way

- "How are you in this moment?"
- "What was school drop-off like today?"
- "I know nights can be hard, how has your sleep been lately?"

Ask about their grief

- "How is grief showing up for you right now?"
- "Is anything helping or sustaining you lately?"
- "What's caught you off guard recently?"
- "From one to ten, how would you rate your grief intensity this week?"

Remember, if you do ask how they are, be sure you have the time and energy to listen to the real answer.

MORE ABOUT LISTENING

Listening is more than not talking. Here are ways to show your friend or family member that you're truly paying attention.

Ease up on the questions. Asking a lot of detailed questions, especially about how their person died, can leave your friend or family member feeling like they're on the witness stand.

Avoid giving advice or suggestions. The urge to give advice comes from a compassionate place of wanting someone to feel better, but unless they ask for advice, it's best to hold off on telling them what you think they should do. If you're not sure if your friend is looking for suggestions, you can ask "Do you just want to vent or are you looking for ideas?"

Get more comfortable with silence. Grief isn't easy to put into words, so work on getting comfortable with long pauses in the conversation. It might feel awkward at first, but it can get easier.

SO WHAT SHOULD I SAY?

Everyone is different and there's no perfect thing to say, but here are some ideas:

I heard the news and I'm here — for talking, not talking, listening, distracting, taking a break, yelling into the void...

Grief is so different for everyone, what's it been like for you lately?

There's no expiration date for grief, and I won't get tired of hearing about yours.

I still think you're a great parent/friend/co-worker/cousin, even on days when you have nothing to give.

Does it help to hear stories about your person who died? If so, I remember the time when..

I've been thinking about you with the upcoming anniversary/birthday/holiday/first day of school etc.). How are you feeling about the approach?

Find more with Dougy Center's Tip Sheet, ["What to Say Instead."](#)



OKAY, BUT WHAT CAN I DO?

While you can't do anything to take someone's pain away, you can do things to help support them. Checking in, showing up over the long term, and truly listening are great first steps.

If you want to do more, keep these three things in mind:

1. Be specific and concrete

Making a specific offer reduces the mental load for the person you're trying to support. When you say "let me know if I can do anything," you're making them do the thinking. Instead, offer something concrete so they only have to answer with a simple yes or no.

2. Follow-through

If you do offer to do something, make sure it's something you can follow through on. This is where it's important to know yourself and your skill set. If cooking is hard for you, instead of dropping off a meal, consider getting a gift card for food delivery or ask if you can pick up groceries for them.

3. Don't take it personally

If your family member or friend declines your offer or doesn't respond, don't take it personally. Grief can be exhausting and overwhelming, leaving people too depleted to respond to every text, email, or phone call.

HERE ARE SOME IDEAS for specific tasks that can reduce your friend or family member's to-do list — and could give you a chance to spend time together.



Potential Ideas

- Early on, ask if you can help with logistics such as being the point person for answering questions, arranging a meal train, researching grief support resources, or tasks related to a memorial, funeral, homegoing, or celebration of life.
- If your family member or friend has kids, childcare can be invaluable. Drive them to school or activities, take them to a movie, help with homework, watch them so your friend can have some time alone, even if it's just to do errands.
- Deliver groceries, bonus if you already know the staples they often need.
- Offer to clean their house, do the laundry, mow the lawn, or do other chores. Keep in mind this kind of help can feel very personal, so give them an easy way to decline. *It's okay to say no, but I have time this Saturday afternoon, would it be helpful if I came and mowed your lawn?*
- Continue to invite them to gatherings and events, but also to day-to-day meet ups like a walk or coffee. Again, it's helpful to preface the invite with, *It's okay if you're not up for it, but I wanted to see if you'd like to...*
- Offer to take children shopping for their parent/caregiver for special days like their birthday or holiday by asking, *I know it can be awkward to take your kids shopping for your gift and it's also important for them, so would it be okay if I took them shopping?*

DON'T FORGET ABOUT YOURSELF

Grief takes energy and so does supporting a friend who is grieving. Intense feelings and thoughts might come up for you as you listen to your friend. It's important to have people who can be there for you. Friends, family, teachers, counselors, and even animals can be good sources of support. As you care for your friend, make sure you care for yourself by eating nourishing food, drinking water, moving your body, remembering to laugh and have fun, and anything else that helps you feel like yourself (art, music, writing, sports).



THANK YOU for taking the time to read through these suggestions and for making the effort to be there for your friends and family members who are grieving. For more resources and support, please visit dougyc.org or contact us at 503.775.5683 or help@dougyc.org.



The National Grief Center
for Children & Families

Dougy Center Bookstore/Resources

Dougy Center's practical, easy-to-use materials are based on what they have learned from more than 65,000 Dougy Center participants. To order online, visit dougyc.org or dougycbookstore.org, or call 503.775.5683.

About Dougy Center

Founded in 1982, Dougy Center provides grief support in a safe place where children, teens, young adults, and their families can share their experiences before and after a death. Dougy Center provides support and training locally, nationally, and internationally to individuals and organizations seeking to assist children in grief.

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