

Grief Situations: Do's and Don'ts
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“Books are where things are explained to you; life is where things aren't.”
Quote from Julian Barnes, author, 1986

I. What to say

1. I'm sorry for your loss. I'm so sorry. Okay to say, “I don't know what to say.”
2. I'm thinking of you.
3. I'm praying for you.
4. Share a brief memory of the one who has died - especially a funny one
5. Laugh with the person
6. Cry with the person
7. It's okay to say this stinks or whatever to acknowledge your pain and theirs.
8. Don't feel like you have to say so much. Your presence is enough.

II. What Not to Say -

1. God must have needed another angel
2. God must have a plan in this
3. “You know they are in a better place.”
4. Everything happens for a reason
(People have different theologies. Don't try to be a theologian unless you are one. They may want to have those conversations with you, but if so, do it at their prompting/invitation.)
5. How are you? (The person is working hard to keep themselves together. Most don't want to cry and be upset around other people. Give them the respect and dignity they are trying to have.)
6. Don't ask any question that requires the person to give a response. Just say, “I'm thinking of you.” Let them decide what they want to share. If you are a close friend, you can ask “how are you?”, but be prepared for the answer.
7. Don't say, “At... (insert holiday or event) as my family sat around the table, and I looked out at my boys I couldn't help but think of you...” Just say “I'm sure this is a hard time. I'm thinking of you.”
8. Some things may be the right thing to say, but not the right time to say them.
9. “I don't know how you do it.” They may not know either. They survive by the Grace of God and because they choose to survive. Perhaps instead – “watching you survive this gives me strength.”
10. I hate for someone to say, “you look like you're doing so well.” The truth is, I choose everyday to do as well I can. I choose to get up and live another day. I choose to rejoice in his life and not dishonor him by falling apart all the time. But, it takes an enormous amount of strength to do that. Instead say, “I'm glad to see you.”

Bonus tip - Now when meeting people - Say , “Tell me about your family” instead of “Do you have children?” I lived in dread of people asking that question.

III. What to do in the beginning-

1. First, determine what kind of friend you are to the person that is grieving. If you are a very close friend to that person then there is more you can do. If you are not very close to that person, there is no need to try to be now. Your relationship with the person before will determine how helpful you can be and what you can do now.

2. Take food. Help in the kitchen. Someone there to handle food and people coming.
3. Offer specific things – “May I go to the grocery store for you?” “May I make some phone calls for you?” “I would like to come and cut your grass.”
4. Answer the phone at the house.
5. Offer to go buy clothes or help pick out clothes for the funeral.
6. Offer to go to the funeral home with them to pick out the coffin or to see the body for the first time if you a very close friend or relative.
7. Offer to provide a place for family from out of town to stay or to pick them up at airport.
8. Send flowers and/or cards.
9. Go to the funeral & funeral home; sign the book clearly.

VI. What to do after the funeral

1. Send cards
2. Keep sending cards
3. Keep taking food
4. Talk about the person who has died. Your mentioning them will not be the first time they have thought of that person that day.
5. Invite the person to do things with you. Give them the opportunity to say yes or no. Keep asking. It is hard to get out in public.
6. Remember significant dates (birthdays, anniversary of death, high school graduation, etc.)
7. Allow the grieving person to talk about the one who has died.
8. Don't forget them after the first month or six months. Grief is a long process.
9. Remember that grief moves forward and backwards.
10. If you think, “I wonder if I should...” You probably should.
11. Small gifts are appreciated. Food that can be frozen for later.
12. Offer to go to the grocery store for them or pick up things for them when you are going.
13. If you give flowers that have to be planted, then tell them that your planting them comes with the gift and then come back and do it.
14. Offer to help with or to put up the Christmas tree the first year.
15. Help them find meaningful ways to remember and celebrate the one they have lost.
16. Offer to help make flower arrangements for the grave.
17. If you are that kind of friend, then be there - for a long time.
18. Okay to talk about your family/ children but don't tell lots of details or long stories..

VII. What not to do -

1. Don't just run in and do the laundry. Ask first.
2. Don't go hang out at the house unless you were a “hang out” friend before.
3. Don't try to force them to eat. Encourage gently. They physically can't.
4. Don't tell the person a long story about your experience. Later may be more appropriate.
5. Don't carry on long detailed conversations. Person can't think or concentrate and probably doesn't care.
6. Don't start a conversation or a visit if you are overly emotional, then the grieving person ends up having to comfort you. Wait until you are stronger.
7. Don't take family pictures at first holidays.

VIII. Two Helpful Resources

- 1- *Tear Soup* - Pat Schwiebert & Chuck Deklyn
- 2 - *Five Cries of Grief* - by Merton and Irene Strommen