

Is There Anything I Can Do To Help?

Suggestions for the Friends and Relatives of the Grieving Survivor

YES, there is a lot that you can do to help. Simple things. This guide suggests the kinds of attitudes, word, and acts, which are very helpful.

The importance of such help can hardly be over stated. Bereavement can be a life-threatening condition, and your support may make a vital difference in the mourner's eventual recovery.

Perhaps you so not feel qualified to help. You may feel uncomfortable and awkward. Such feelings are normal – don't let them keep you away. If you really care for your sorrowing friend or relative (or stranger), if you can enter a little into their grief, you are qualified to help.

In fact, the simple communication of the feeling of caring is probably the most important and helpful thing anyone can do. The guidelines which follow show how to communicate your care.

1. **Get in touch.** Telephone. Speak either to the mourner or to someone close and ask when you can visit and how you might help. Even if a lot of time has passed, it is never too late to express your concern.
2. **Say little on an early visit.** In the initial period (before burial), your brief embrace, your press of the hand, your few words of affection and feeling may be all that is needed.
3. **Avoid clichés and easy answers.** “He had a good life,” “He is out of pain,” and “Aren't you lucky that...,” are not phrases that are likely to help. A simple: “I'm sorry,” is better. Likewise spiritual saying can even provoke anger unless the mourner shares the faith that is implied. In general, do not attempt to minimize the loss.
4. **Be yourself.** Show your own natural concern and sorrow in your own way and in your own words.
5. **Keep in touch.** Be available. Be there. If you are a close friend or relative, your presence might be needed from the beginning. Later, when close friends and family may be less available, anyone's visit and phone call can be very helpful.
6. **Attend to practical matters.** Discover if you might be needed to answer the phone, usher in callers, prepare meals, clean the house, care for the children or pets, etc. This kind of help lifts burdens and creates a bond. It might be needed well beyond the initial period, especially for the widowed.

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7. **Encourage others to visit or help.** Usually one visit will overcome a friend's discomfort and all them to contribute further support. You might even be able to schedule some visitors, so that everyone does not come at once in the beginning and fails to come at all later on.
8. **Accept silence.** If the mourner doesn't feel like talking, don't force conversation. Silence is better than aimless chatter. The mourner should be allowed to lead.
9. **Be a good listener.** When suffering spills over into words, you can do the one thing the bereaved needs above all else at that time – you can listen. Are they emotional? Accept that. Are they crying? Accept that also. Are they angry at God? God will manage without your defending Him. Accept whatever feelings are expressed. Do not rebuke. Do not change the subject. Be as understanding as you can be.
10. **Do not attempt to tell the bereaved how they feel.** You can ask (without probing), but you cannot know, except as they tell you. Everyone, bereaved or not, resents an attempt to describe their feelings. To say, for example, "You must feel relieved now that he is out of pain," is presumptuous. Even to say, "I know just how you feel," is questionable. Learn from the mourner; do not instruct them.
11. **Do not probe for details about the death.** If the survivor offers information, listen with understanding.
12. **Comfort children in the family.** Do not assume that a seemingly calm child is not sorrowing. If you can, be a friend to whom feelings can be confided and with whom tears can be shed. In most cases, incidentally, children should be left in the home and not shielded from the grieving of others.
13. **Avoid talking to others about trivia in the presence of the recently bereaved.** Prolonged discussion of sports, weather or the stock market, for example, may be resented, even if done purposely to distract the mourner.
14. **Allow the working through of grief.** Do not whisk away clothing or hide pictures. Do not criticize seemingly morbid behavior. Young people may repeatedly visit the site of the fatal accident. A widow may sleep with her pajamas as a pillow. A young child may wear his dead sibling's clothing.

15. **Write a letter.** A sympathy card is a poor substitute for your own expression. If you take time to write of your love for and memories of the one who died, your letter might be read many times and cherished, possibly into the next generation.
16. **Encourage the postponement of major decision until after the period of intense grief.** Whatever can wait, should wait.
17. **In time, gently draw the mourner into quiet, outside activities.** They may not have the initiative to go out on their own.
18. **When the mourner returns to social activity, treat them as a normal person.** Avoid pity – it destroys self-respect. Simple understanding is enough. Acknowledge the loss, the change in their life, but don't dwell on it.
19. **Be aware of needed progress through grief.** If the mourner seems unable to resolve anger or guilt, for example, you might suggest a consultation with a member of the clergy or other trained counselor.

A final thought. Helping must be more than following a few rules. Especially if the bereavement is devastating and you are close to the bereaved, you may have to give more time, more care, more of yourself than you imagined. And you will have to perceive the special needs of your friend and creatively attempt to meet those needs. Such commitment and effort may even save a life. At the least, you will know the satisfaction of being truly and deeply helpful.