

Social Responses to Grieving & Loss

“The loss of a loved person is one of the most intensely painful experiences any human being can suffer, and not only is it painful to experience, but also painful to witness, if only because we’re so impotent to help” ~ John Bowlby (1980)

Most people struggle with how to comfort others who are grieving. Below are some helpful and unhelpful responses, and suggestions for how you might best receive support from others during a time of grieving.

Unhelpful Responses

- Forcing a timeline onto others about what is “normal” or “natural” grieving and mourning.
- Avoiding talking about the deceased person or avoiding mentioning his/her name, as if the person never existed, especially in “unsavory deaths” such as when the person dies from murder, suicide, or a drug overdose.
- Alternatively, bringing up the deceased person when the mourner is not comfortable doing so.
- Saying clichés such as “Be strong,” “I’m sorry for your loss,” “Time heals all,” “You’ll get over it soon,” “S/he is in a better place now,” or “At least you have...” Though often well-intentioned, these responses can be painful and diminish the uniqueness and depth of a person’s loss. These premature reassurances can feel empty and diminishing, or can contribute to a grieving person feel like they need to “hurry up” or “be positive” sooner than they are ready.
- Comparing losses: Sometimes, sharing your own loss experiences can be helpful, but it should be done delicately, typically not as a first response, and it should never turn the conversation to being “all about you” or your own losses (e.g., perhaps wait to share your own loss story until the mourner asks you what it was like when you lost someone).
- “Babying” or treating the grieving person with “kid gloves.” Treating a mourner as an adult can help maintain a sense of normalcy for those who are grieving.
- Co-workers’ or supervisor’s or teachers’ thinking that “If you’re here [at work or school], you must be better” and able to function at normal capacity again.

Helpful Responses

- Continuing to offer support well beyond the funeral, remembering that grieving is a process, not a single event.
- Listening; doing much more listening than talking. When sharing, using a compassionate, caring tone of voice, and providing much empathy.
- Having patience and thinking about *being with* the mourner in her/his pain rather than trying to take it away.
- Reflecting on your own experiences of loss (including the frustrations with/appreciation for others' reactions to you) as a way of approaching how you might react to others who are grieving.
- Gently asking the mourner what s/he is needing and what would most helpful right now (without putting a lot of demands on them to work/figure out things).
- Offering practical support—shopping, cooking, cleaning, etc., particularly in the first few months around the death. Sometimes people say to friends, “Call if you need anything,” but very often, grieving people are not thinking entirely clearly and may not have the mental clarity or the energy to know what is needed or to reach out for this support.
- Recognizing the importance of anniversaries and holidays.
- Considering cultural differences when a loved one is grieving. For example, trying to learn more about and participating in meaningful rituals of the griever's culture (e.g., Catholic tradition includes a wake, Jewish traditions include sitting Shiva/placing stones on the grave, and so forth).
- Suggesting professional resources, especially if the person grieving is feeling depressed or anxious for several weeks or months beyond the loss.

How You Can Best Receive Support

- Remember that few of us know how to grieve and mourn! Therefore, try to avoid forming strong judgments of others when you are in the midst of intense grieving. As hard as it may be, giving the benefit of the doubt to people (i.e., second or even third chances) who are trying to support you can be helpful.
- Be prepared to experience additional losses (e.g., as above, when others may not be there for you in the ways you need), but also be prepared for pleasant surprises. You may connect with people with whom you did not previously bond based on your shared loss experiences.
- Have awareness of your “boundaries of mourning.” That is, understand that certain environments and individuals will be more understanding than others. To illustrate, a supervisor may be less supportive than a close friend, or a parent may be less emotionally healthy than a sibling and this may shape how you act or what you share.
- It may be difficult, but try to express to friends, family, partners, and colleagues when you need support (emotional or tangible) and whether you are feeling the pressure to be “better” sooner than you are ready.