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TIPS FOR SUPPORTING SOMEONE WHO IS GRIEVING

When someone is hurting we want to help. Sometimes, what we think is helpful is actually very unhelpful. Our history with a person, the nature of our relationship, our intention, and our consistent efforts make a difference in whether we are helpful or just getting in the way.

1 LISTEN FIRST

Being supportive starts with self-awareness about how we communicate. Good communication starts with listening. Talking is not always helpful; listening is. Often what people need most is to be heard and feel understood. The act of listening has nothing to do with you, except your willingness to understand the speaker's perspective. An effective listener can move others into deeper sharing of their story, feelings, struggles, and perspective.

2 INVITE MORE SHARING

You have to earn credibility as someone who is trustworthy, interested in understanding, and actually cares. Listening first creates an invitation to the speaker to share more. Inviting more sharing says you're genuinely interested, have no agenda, will not judge, and shows a desire to understand by continuing to show up and listen.

3 BE CONSISTENT

Listen. Invite more sharing. Keep showing up. It's not a flashy strategic plan and it doesn't always feel good, but it is the "nuts and bolts" of providing support.

4 MOBILIZE OTHERS

Mobilizing people and resources can happen in many different ways. The "Platinum Rule" is applicable: do to others what they want done. Very few people want to eat lasagna for the next 90 days, so don't mobilize a lasagna squad. Yet, people need to be fed. Life is busy for most people because there is so much to do. Assess what someone needs and help them. Grief is as much an individual as a communal process. We need other people to help get us through. Grief is not a 2 week, 2 month, or 6 month experience. It is a lifelong process. So, help build a supportive community now and in the future.

5 ASK QUESTIONS

Do. Not. Assume. What is good for you may not be good or helpful to someone else. So, just ask. You may want to jump in quickly to feel helpful, but ask first. Asking does not equate with doing nothing. On the contrary, asking makes way for more effective support. Don't say "let me know what I can do" because few people know in the moment. Identify a concrete need and then understand how to meet it.



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6 SHOW UP

Absence and silence are brutally painful. It's not your job to fix anything or make it better. Being is more beneficial than doing. Just show up and be present. What often happens in our society is that people show up for the first couple of months and then the support fades. Keep showing up, and check out our tips on [effective communication](#) for more.

7 DON'T TRY TO FIX

"Helpers" often become "fixers." That's a real obstacle to being supportive. Nothing is broken. No words or actions can or have ever made it all better. Take the pressure off yourself to come up with the perfect thing to say or do because you won't think of it. Being present is at the heart of being helpful.

8 GRIEF IS NORMAL AND SERVES A PURPOSE

Grief is the compilation of a lot of feelings, some of which are very hard to hear and witness. Just because they are intense or difficult doesn't mean there is something wrong or deranged. Grief is normal and serves an important purpose. People don't always get out of bed, shower, remember to eat, or know where they are going next. Don't say, "Go get help" because that dismisses the intensity of the grief and abnormalizes it. Instead, say "I am here and we are going to get through this." And then keep showing up.¹

9 TALK ABOUT THE PERSON WHO DIED

Sometimes people need to take a break from talking about the person who died. That's okay. It's not okay for us to stop sharing memories, ignore what happened, pretend that everything is fine, or change the subject. Often times, people will talk about their loved one and their grief if we ask questions and create a trusting environment.

10 BE PATIENT AND ENCOURAGE

Grief can be a broken record. Sometimes people replay a story over and over. Sometimes they forget what they said or seem perpetually confused or lost. That's okay. Patience and encouragement helps with the daily rebuilding process for creating a new routine and sense of normalcy. Be a patient guide, knowing that the person is trying to find a way forward.

¹ **DSM-V Diagnostic Criteria for Bereavement-Related Disorders in Children and Adolescents: Developmental Considerations**; Julie B. Kaplow, Christopher M. Layne, Robert S. Pynoos, Judith A. Cohen, and Alicia Lieberman; © 2012 Washington School of Psychiatry