

Are You Supporting Someone Experiencing Sudden Loss?

What Friends Can Do

Supporting Someone through Their Grief

When someone close to a friend dies suddenly, it is often hard to know how to help your friend or what to say. This is a normal response. The following information may help.

Express Your Sympathy

A heartfelt 'I'm really sorry for your loss' is usually the most supportive thing you can say. Avoid saying things like: 'at least you have other children' or 'you'll find someone else'. Although well intentioned, such comments can often hurt.

Understand Their Emotions

Understand that your friend may be experiencing a number of intense emotions including shock, pain, anger, bewilderment, disbelief, yearning, anxiety, depression and stress.

Listening is probably the most helpful thing you can do.

Grief Is Individual

Grief is an intensely individual journey and affects us all differently. So although you may have experienced grief yourself, don't say: 'I know how you feel'. Instead, ask how your friend is feeling.

Listen

Listening is probably the most helpful thing you can do. You can't take away their pain, but you can help them by being there, caring and listening without judging.

Stay in Touch

Don't abandon your friend. There may be times when your offers of help are refused – try again later. If you feel awkward because you don't know what to do or say, then be honest, say: 'I'm not sure what to say... is there anything I can do?'

Send a Note

If you don't know what to say, you can just write 'thinking of you'.

Share happy memories of the person who has died and talk about what they meant to you.

Give Your Friend Time To Heal

Don't expect that your friend or family member will be 'over it' in a few weeks or months – it may take years. Try to remember birthdays and other special days, and be aware that these may be particularly difficult times.

Offer Practical Help

Offer to make a meal, pay a bill, do the shopping or the washing.

Help Find Resources

Help your friend find information or a counsellor if they're in need or have no 'good' days.

What Not To Do

- Don't avoid talking about their person who has died. This may seem like you're denying they ever existed, which can be very hurtful
- Don't use clichés such as 'you must be strong' and 'life goes on'
- Don't keep asking for details of the death/suicide
- Don't lay blame or give reasons to explain the death/suicide

Recovery

When your friend can face and talk of their grief, and show their feelings is when conversation can start to move from death and dying to life and living.

Knowing this will help you avoid the temptation to compare or to judge your friend's grief responses with your own.

Importantly, be kind to yourself.

Sharing your friend's loss can be draining. On top of this, you may also share the loss and be dealing with your own grief. So make time to do some special things for yourself and stay in touch with your own feelings.

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How Employers and Work Colleagues Can Help

Returning to work can be very stressful for a bereaved person. They should return only when they feel able and they may prefer to work flexitime or part-time for a while.

Employers and colleagues should be aware of and sympathetic towards the person's need for time off, which may be to attend an inquest or receive counselling.

Bereaved people may find it difficult to concentrate and harder to assess complex situations and react as quickly as they did, which can lead to a lack of confidence. By showing understanding and acknowledging their loss, you can contribute greatly to them regaining confidence in their own ability to cope.

Some bereaved people may have jobs where they work with people who are experiencing problems and trauma (for example health care staff, social and care workers, police) and this can be very difficult after a bereavement. They may feel vulnerable and that the problems of others weigh very heavily on them. This can emphasise their grief and affect their ability to be detached in their work.

Be understanding and sensitive to these feelings. Sometimes a bereaved person finds it easier to talk to those who are more 'distant' from the death and may talk to you or other colleagues about it. You might find this embarrassing or awkward, but you can help simply by being a good listener, by not giving advice and by mentioning the death rather than avoiding it.

If someone who works in a small, close-knit working environment takes their own life, the whole group is likely to be affected. Colleagues may have to take over the workload of the person who has died, at a time when they might be in distress and not functioning as they normally would. It is important to be sensitive to each other's needs, accepting that everyone will react in different ways.

Sometimes, professional counselling may be offered on a group or individual basis, but with no pressure to attend. Some professions have dedicated confidential helplines that can offer support to people in this situation. The section above on 'How friends can help' may also be useful for colleagues.

How Teachers Can Help

A child or young person bereaved by a family suicide will need support from their school. The structure and routine of school may provide a safe haven away from the grieving family. Try to keep things as normal as possible, but make sure that they have an opportunity to talk to you, another teacher or school counsellor, or to take time out to be quiet if they need to. Talk to their friends about how they can help too.

Although some children or young people seem to cope at school without too much difficulty, many will show behavioural changes such as mood swings, being upset by small things, withdrawing or being disruptive in class. They may be unable to concentrate and fall behind or become completely wrapped up in their work. Special dates like birthdays, Christmas and the anniversary of a death will be particularly difficult. All of these are normal reactions and sensitive approach should help the child or young person feel supported.

If a student has taken their own life, you can try to help their classmates understand that there are other ways of solving problems and that help is available. Suicidal feelings are more likely to occur among people who know someone else who has died by suicide. Be alert to warning signs and provide help if necessary. Open discussion of what has happened is more useful than avoiding any mention of the death.

headspace School Support works with school communities to prepare for, respond to, and recover from suicide.

The service is flexible and is designed to respond to the individual needs of schools. Support is provided by working with relevant education bodies, local *headspace* Centres and other service providers.

You can find out more information at
www.headspace.org.au/what-works/school-support

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