

YOUR FRIEND IS GRIEVING

TIPS FOR SUPPORTING THEM



The Dougy Center
The National Center for Grieving Children & Families

You're likely reading this because someone you're close to is grieving. Whether they had a parent, sibling, partner, close friend, or other family member die, you might be wondering what to say or do and not say or do. Grief is confusing, both for those grieving and for those who care about them. It can feel awkward, scary, uncomfortable, confusing, and surreal. Just as you might not know what to do or say, people who are grieving often aren't sure what they need. That's why "Let me know if I can do anything" can be hard to hear. If you've already said that, it's okay — almost everyone does.

This tip sheet is a collection of suggestions from grieving kids, teens and young adults. They share specific things you can do and say to be supportive. Note: grief is as unique as we are, so not all of these suggestions will fit for your particular friend. Pick the ones you think might be helpful — or you can show them this tip sheet and talk about what they think would work for them.

WHAT DOES GRIEF LOOK LIKE? IT'S WAY MORE THAN JUST SADNESS...

Anything and everything — and sometimes nothing at all. Just because someone is grieving, doesn't mean you'll be able to tell by what they look like or how they are acting. If you've heard that someone in their life died, believe it and don't question it. Grief looks different for everyone and can be affected by things like someone's age, their relationship with the person who died, religious/not religious background, gender, culture, ethnicity, and everything else that goes into the unique constellation that is your friend. You can best help your friend by supporting however they are expressing their grief, as long as they aren't hurting themselves or someone else.

If you are worried that your friend is thinking about hurting or killing themselves, reach out to someone you trust for help. You can also call 1-800-273-TALK to get additional support.

WHERE TO START

Put down the toolbox. Your friend doesn't need you to fix them or their grief, which is good because grief can't be fixed! What they do need is for you to show up, stick around, act normal, and listen. Sounds easy right? It can be, and sometimes even people with the best intentions avoid the person who is grieving because they don't know what to do or say. Death and grief can make people really uncomfortable, so there's a good chance your friend is having to deal with other people's feelings about *their* feelings. You can make a difference by being the friend who listens without making it about you.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SHOWING UP – AND ACTING NORMAL

After a death, everything in your friend's world likely feels new and strange. Kids, teens, and young adults say they appreciated the friends who continued to text, call, and just hang out with them. They might say no (because grief takes a LOT of energy) but don't take it personally. They want to be there for you too, but it might look different for a while. You can also give your friend a free pass to say no or to not even respond.

"Hey — no need to reply. Just wanted to send you this ridiculous picture of puppies playing in the mud. I'm here."

"It's okay to say no, but Hayden and I are going to a show on Friday, want to go with us?"

CHECKING IN

The question, "How are you?" can be hard to answer for a grieving person. If you want to ask your friend how they are, be sure you have the time and energy to listen to the real answer. Reaching out to your friend helps them feel less alone, so here are some other ways to ask how they're doing that might be a little easier for them to answer.

- How are you in this moment?
- How's your grief been behaving lately?
- What would be most helpful from me right now?

We want to hang out and be normal. We also want to talk about the people in our lives who died without it having to always be sad and serious — sometimes it is — but a lot of the time we want to tell stories and memories that make us laugh, smile, or feel close to them.

HOW TO LISTEN, LIKE REALLY REALLY LISTEN

Listening is more than not talking. Here are ways to communicate you're truly paying attention.

Put away any distractions like phones and laptops. Talking about grief is tough and many grieving people worry that other people can't handle what they're saying, so any sign you're looking for something else to do might make it seem like it's not safe to share.

Go light on the questions. Asking a lot of detailed questions can leave your friend feeling like they're on the witness stand.

Hold off on giving advice or suggestions. It's hard when friends are in pain. The urge to give advice comes from a compassionate place of wanting someone to feel better, but unless your friend asks for advice, it's best to hold off on telling them what you think they should do. If you're not sure if your friend is looking for suggestions, you can ask "Do you just want to vent or are you looking for ideas?"

Be okay with silence. Grief isn't easy to put into words, so try getting comfortable with long pauses in the conversation. It might feel awkward at first, but it gets easier!



You know those casual comments people make with words like “dead” or “kill”? They can be really painful for your friend who is grieving.

Try to avoid saying things like:

- “This class is killing me.”
- “You gave me a heart attack.”
- “You’re killing me/he’s killing it.”
- “I wish my (mom/dad/brother/sister/ anyone) would just die, my life would be so much better.”
It can also be hard for your friend to hear people complaining about the people in their life. If your friend’s mom died and your mom is still in your life, be aware of how you talk about her in front of your friend.
- Making gestures like hanging or shooting yourself or someone else
- “I feel like dying/I could kill myself right now.” — **AND** — If you’re having thoughts of suicide, please say something to someone you trust and ask for help. 1-800-273-TALK.

AND WHAT CAN I DO?

You’ve already got *show up, listen, and act normal* on the list of ways to be helpful. But what else can you do? Grief can leave people feeling exhausted and overwhelmed.

Helping with specific tasks on your friend’s to-do list means less work for them and a chance to spend time together.

Potential ideas

- Help clean their room/apartment/office — maybe the closet too?!
- Deliver groceries. *If you’re a kid or a teen, ask the adults in your life for help if needed.*
- Help them study or work on a project. Grief can make concentrating extra tough.
- Bring them their favorite snack.
- Invite them for a sleepover/sleep over at their house.
- Take their dog for a walk or scoop out their cat’s litter box (gross, we know).
- Ask their least favorite chore and do it with or for them once or twice a week.
- Organize a game or movie night for them and a few close friends.

SO WHAT SHOULD I SAY?

With that list of what not to say, you might be wondering, “Well, what should I say?” Everyone is different, so there’s no perfect thing to say, but here are some ideas.

NOPE

I’m sorry for your loss.

I know what you’re going through.

Are you still grieving?/Aren’t you over it yet?

I know how you feel, my grandmother died last year.

You’re just so sad lately.

YES!

I heard about your dad, I’m here for talking, not talking, taking a break...etc.

Grief is so different for everyone, what’s it been like for you?

There is no grief timeline — I won’t get tired of hearing about yours.

Everyone’s grief is different, just wanted you to know that I’ve had someone die too. It’s not the same, but I get it on some level.

Want to hangout this weekend?

HERE ARE OTHER REQUESTS FROM GRIEVING PEOPLE:

Sometimes I worry my memories of my person will fade. If you knew them, offer to write down or tell me stories you have of the person so I can add them to my memory bank.

Please don't compare my grief to anyone else's — a grandparent is not a parent and a sibling is not an uncle.

Only offer to help if you can and will follow through.

Don't try to fix, change, or cheer me up (unless I specifically ask). Let me have my feelings, even if they are messy.

Sometimes just listening and not saying anything at all is the best way to help.

Please, no pity.

Avoid the "You poor thing voice" — you can use your normal voice even if I'm crying.

Ask me about my person who died, rather than the details of the death.

Try your best to stay calm and present.

Ask me what I liked to do with my person who died and offer to do it with me.

GREAT. NOW I'M EXHAUSTED

Grief takes energy and so does supporting a friend who is grieving. Intense feelings and thoughts might come up for you as you listen to your friend, so it's important to have people who can be there for you. Friends, family, teachers, counselors, and even animals can be good sources of support. As you care for your friend, make sure you care for yourself by eating nourishing food, drinking water, moving your body, remembering to laugh and have fun, and anything else that helps you feel like yourself (art, music, writing, sports).



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Thank you for taking time to read through this tip sheet and to be there for your friend who is grieving. If you have any questions, please reach out to us at 503.775.5683 or help@dougy.org.