



Sitting with Grief – Tips for Supporting Loved Ones Who are Grieving

The phone rings and on the other end is a friend or family member telling you that someone important to them has died. You don't know what to say, but you want to make them feel better. You notice feelings of discomfort or a deep sadness arise in your own heart. You scramble to say something, ANYTHING and notice that your friend goes quiet and a few moments later gets off the phone.

Supporting a loved one who has lost a loved one is hard. It's difficult to watch someone you love in the acute pain that is normal in the beginning of a grief journey. It's hard when you watch a loved one transform, weighted down by despair, hopelessness and the overwhelming task of putting one foot in front of the other in a world that has been turned upside down.

As an agency specializing in grief and loss, the Wendt Center can offer guidance for supporting those you love as they move through the grief of someone they love dying. While some individuals will die due to COVID-19, we know other deaths will occur as well, some sudden and unexpected. We know that grieving in the time of COVID-19 looks different and below you'll find some special considerations about that experience.

Where do you start to support someone who is grieving?

Avoid trying to "fix" their pain. Instead, listen, practice compassion and offer grace to yourself and the loved one you are supporting.

Acute grief is the experience of grief immediately after—and in the months or years following—the death of someone we love. Acute is not about how long it's been but rather speaks to the intensity and frequency of the grief symptoms one experiences. For most individuals, the experience brings intense emotional, physical, and spiritual responses. Support from friends and family provides safety and comfort for those who are grieving. It's important to understand that the pain of grief cannot be removed; it can only be moved through. While there is no "fixing" or making your loved one "better," we do have the capacity to sit together figuratively and allow each other the grace of being just where we are, and having the experience just as it is, painful as that can be.

Grieving in the times of COVID-19

Given the physical distancing required during COVID-19, we know that some individuals will be unable to say goodbye or be with their loved ones as they die. This adds a complicating layer to the grief process that may extend that acute stage of grief.

During this pandemic, the traditional ways we may support grief—such as gathering together, bringing meals, giving hugs and holding hands—may feel unsafe or ill-advised. It may feel uncomfortable or upsetting to not be able to be present with the bereaved in the way you ideally want to. It's okay to feel

this way. Acknowledge these emotions and remind yourself that you can still hold space for those who are grieving and provide gentle, loving care during this difficult time.

During this unusual time, we are challenged to think of different, creative ways to support those who are grieving. The Wendt Center wants to remind you that supporting a loved one through grief is more about “being” than “doing.”

Listening

The most important thing you can do is “show up” and listen. Avoid sharing your own loss story. We understand this is an attempt to connect with your loved one and illustrate that you care about what they are going through. However, in the beginning, acute stage of grief, it’s important to allow your loved one to share their pain fully without feeling the need to tend to you and your loss experiences of the past. Often saying, “that’s so hard, I’m so glad you told me” will allow for greater healing than “I know just how you feel, when I lost.....” It’s okay for there to be silence. It’s okay not to know what to say. Listen to understand, not respond. Silence is a useful part of connecting with others. Simply sitting in silence, being present, and letting your loved one know you are there for them is incredibly valuable to those grieving.

Practice Compassion

Creating space for someone to share their grief emotions is one of the most impactful ways to support a loved one who is grieving. Practicing compassion means staying out of judgment. Every thought or feeling that shows up in a grief process is NORMAL and OKAY. While society often pathologizes grief, at the Wendt Center we understand that the range of grief responses is as diverse as the world at large. There is no “one size fits all” response to grief. As a supporter, your job is to let go of judging whether your loved one is “okay” and instead practice compassion by allowing their responses to “make sense.” The reality is that their response does “make sense” for them. We created a [companion video](#) talking about the spectrum of responses common to the grief process.

While you are practicing compassion for your loved one, please also practice compassion for yourself. It is incredibly challenging to hold space and witness a loved one’s pain, knowing you cannot take it away. You are unable to do what your loved one most wants – bring their loved one back to life. The work of grief support is HARD. It’s okay to admit you don’t have the capacity to hold space, but do follow up with your friend or loved one once your capacity returns.

Offer Grace

Grief can bring on irritability, frustration, disorganization, and “brain fog.” Can you give your loved one a little more space to show up this way? Offering grace translates to letting your loved one show up however they show up. No advice, no scolding, no suggesting they need to be different. It also means not taking what they might do personally and understand it is likely not about you, but rather about their challenges with managing their emotions. Offering grace means not having to point out each time they say something sharp or dismissive. Offering grace to yourself is also useful. “I feel sad that I can’t take away their pain, but even sitting in silence can be helpful and I AM doing that.”

Helpful and Unhelpful Statements

Below we offer a few statements you might consider avoiding as well as those that can help. There may be times when some of those listed on the “unhelpful” list *could* be helpful, but this is typically *not* true in the early stages of a grief process. While some of these statements can be true, saying them *before* the griever has a chance to express all their hard feelings and thoughts can be harmful. Follow your griever’s lead and validate any and all feelings they have—even if they express something we suggested you might avoid saying.

