How You Can Help Later

There is much that you can do to help – simple things. The following suggests the kinds of attitudes, words, and acts, which are truly helpful.

The importance of such help can hardly be overstated. Bereavement can be a life-threatening condition, and your support may make a vital difference in the mourner's eventual recovery.

Perhaps you do not feel qualified to help. You may feel uncomfortable and awkward. Such feelings are normal – don't let them keep you away. If you really care for your sorrowing friend or relative, if you can enter a little into their grief, you are qualified to help. In fact, the simple communication of the feeling of caring is probably the most important and helpful thing anyone can do.

The following suggestions will guide you in communicating that care:

- **Get in touch.** Telephone. Speak either to the mourner or to someone close and ask when you can visit and how you might help. Even if much time has passed, it's never too late to express your concern.
- **Say little on an early visit.** In the initial period (before burial), your brief embrace, your press of the hand, your few words of affection and feeling may be all that is needed.
- **Avoid clichés and easy answers,** "He is out of pain" and "Aren't you lucky that…" are not likely to help. A simple "I'm sorry" is better.
- Be yourself. Show your natural concern and sorrow in your own way and in your own words.
- **Keep in touch. Be available. Be there.** If you are a close friend or relative, your presence might be needed from the beginning. Later, when close family may be less available, anyone's visit and phone call can be very helpful.
- **Attend to practical matters.** Find out if you are needed to answer the phone, usher in callers, prepare meals, clean the house, care for the children, etc. This kind of help lifts burdens and creates a bond. It might be needed well beyond the initial period, especially for the widowed.
- **Encourage others to visit or help.** Usually one visit will overcome a friend's discomfort and allow them to contribute further support. You might even be able to schedule some visitors so that everyone does not come at once in the beginning and fails to come at all later on.
- **Accept silence.** If the mourner doesn't feel like talking, don't force conversation. Silence is better than aimless chatter. The mourner should be allowed to lead.
- **Be a good listener.** When suffering spills over into words, you can do the one thing the bereaved needs above all else at that time – you can listen. Is she emotional? Accept that. Does he cry? Accept that too. Is she angry at God? God will manage without your defending

him. Accept whatever feelings are expressed. Do not rebuke. Do not change the subject. Be as understanding as you can be.

- **Do not attempt to tell the bereaved how he or she feels.** You can ask (without probing), but you cannot know, except as you are told. Everyone, bereaved or not, resents an attempt to describe their feelings. To say, for example, “You must feel relieved now that he is out of pain,” is presumptuous. Even to say, “I know just how you feel,” is questionable. Learn from the mourner, do not instruct.
- **Do not probe for details about the death.** If the survivor offers information, listen with understanding.
- **Comfort children in the family.** Do not assume that a seemingly calm child is not sorrowing. If you can, be a friend to whom feelings can be confided and with whom tears can be shed. In most cases, incidentally, children should be left in the home and not shielded from the grieving of others.
- **Avoid talking to others about trivia in the presence of the recently bereaved.** Prolonged discussion of sports, weather, or stock market, for example, is resented, even if done purposely to distract the mourner.
- **Allow the “working through” of grief.** Do not whisk away clothing or hide pictures. Do not criticize seemingly morbid behavior. Young people may repeatedly visit the site of the fatal accident. A widow may sleep with her husband’s pajamas as a pillow. A young child may wear his dead sibling’s clothing.
- **Write a letter.** A sympathy card is a poor substitute for your own expression. If you take time to write of your love for and memories of the one who died, your letter might be read many times and cherished, possibly into the next generation.
- **Encourage the postponement of major decisions.** Whatever can wait should wait until after the period of intense grief.
- **In time, gently draw the mourner into quiet outside activity.** They may lose the initiative to go out on their own.
- **When the mourner returns to social activity, treat him or her as a normal person.** Avoid pity – it destroys self-respect. Simple understanding is enough. Acknowledge the loss, the change in the mourner’s life, but don’t dwell on it.
- **Be aware of needed progress through grief.** If the mourner seems unable to resolve anger or guilt, for example, you might suggest a consultation with a member of the clergy or other trained counselor.
- **A final thought:** Helping must be more than following a few rules. Especially if the bereavement is devastating and you are close to the bereaved, you may have to give more time, more care, more of yourself than you imagined. And you will have to perceive the special needs of your friend and creatively attempt to meet those needs. Such commitment and effort may even save a life. At the least, you will know the satisfaction of being truly and deeply helpful.

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Revision #1
Created 2025-12-31 20:09:29 PST by zaneabi

Updated 2025-12-31 20:09:43 PST by zaneabi