

How can I support someone who is experiencing a bereavement?

Many people feel awkward and unsure what to say or do when someone they care about is grieving. You may be worried that talking to them about their loss may make them feel worse, or, that if you don't say enough it will appear cold or uncaring. You may also think that there is little you can do or say to make things better. While you cannot take away the pain of the loss, you can provide much needed comfort and support.

There are many ways to help a grieving friend or family member, starting with letting the person know you care:

- 1. Just being there can help** - your friend will probably be struggling with many intense and difficult emotions such as anger, guilt and sorrow. A supportive and caring presence can be a great comfort. Call in for a cup of tea but do not stay too long. Try to be available, but be aware that while needing the support of company they also need space and that bereavement can be exhausting.
- 2. Be there to listen if your friend needs to talk** - be prepared for strong emotions - they may cry out loud, express regrets, talk about death or want to blame someone for what happened. These are all normal reactions. It doesn't matter that you don't have the answers - just someone to listen can make all the difference to someone who is going through one of life's most difficult experiences. Someone who has experienced a particularly difficult or traumatic bereavement may need to go over the events that happened many times as they try to make sense of the events that happened.
- 3. Offer practical help** - there are many things that need to be done in the days and weeks after a bereavement - including registering the death, planning a funeral and sorting out any money or property. It can be a very busy and stressful time. Offer to help with some of the arrangements, with childcare or offer specific help with chores like shopping and cooking meals.
- 4. Send a short note or card to express your sympathy** - a long letter may be too much in the early days after a bereavement.
- 5. Avoid telling them what they 'should' be feeling or doing** - there is no right or wrong way to grieve and everyone is different. Your friend is likely to have many ups and downs, bad days and good and this is completely normal.
- 6. Support your friend to grieve freely** - trying to appear 'brave' and 'strong' can disrupt the grieving process and can lead to emotional problems. Men, especially, can think it isn't 'manly' and will be a sign of weakness to show their emotions or to cry in public.

- 7. Invite your friend to normal social events and activities** - keeping social and getting back to some old routines can help your friend to feel connected. Offer to go out with them somewhere rather than saying 'you should get out more'.
- 8. Keep checking that they're OK** - don't forget that grieving is a long process.
- 9. Help your friend to work through any big decisions** - be there to listen if your friend needs to make some difficult decisions - such as moving away or selling their house. Support them to make these decisions when they are ready.
- 10. Don't make unhelpful comments** - like 'I know how you feel', 'he lived a long life', 'he's in a better place' or 'you have lots of other things to be thankful for'.
- 11. Don't put pressure on your friend to 'move on' or 'get on' with their life** - there is no set timescale for grieving. The grieving process can take from a few months to two years or more. Everyone is different.
- 12. Remember that special days and anniversaries can be very difficult times** - no matter how many months or years go by.
- 13. Encourage your friend to ask for help if necessary** - it takes time to work through feelings of loss after the death of a loved one and that's quite normal. If you are concerned that your friend is struggling to cope with day-to-day life, finding it hard to go back to work, become 'stuck' in a state of intense grief or feeling very low or hopeless - encourage them to ask for help. You can find information about finding professional help in the MindWell bereavement section www.mindwell-leeds.org.uk/bereavement-or-loss and information about talking to your GP at www.mindwell-leeds.org.uk/talk-to-my-gp