

Dealing with the Grieving

Good advice for those who want to comfort parents whose child has died

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When a child dies, the planet seems to be knocked off its axis for all involved. It's so out of the expected order of things for a parent to bury a child. It seems so unfair for a child to die before getting a chance to truly live. This article is for you kind souls who want to figure out the "right" way to support someone whose child has just died.

My son Jeremy, just over age four, and my daughter Amelia, only 18 months old, both died in a car accident in 1991. I thought there was no way I'd ever have a happy day again in my life, never know peace, never love or care about anything or anyone again. The hole in my heart made the Grand Canyon look like a pothole. There was absolutely no way to survive this – none.

What can you do – and what should you not do – as someone who truly wants to offer comfort? First, know that your kind intentions will be appreciated someday, even if that is not for a long time, until the shock, grief and trauma wear off a bit. Even if the child was expected to die, the actual death is always different than "planned."

Next, know that there's really nothing anyone can do that will make things truly better, unless you somehow have the power to resurrect. But there are important things you can provide as a friend that will make this time easier to bear for the people you love. A lot depends on the nature of your relationship with the family, the way the child died (Suddenly? Slowly? Accident? Crime? Illness? Stillborn? Other?), the age of the child and so on, so this article can at best offer general principles and guidance. You'll have to decide what you will actually choose to do.

The "Don't" list is pretty simple. If you've already done one or more of the don'ts, forget about blaming yourself. Just avoid them in the future and get on with the things you can do to be of value at this horrendously painful time.

DON'T say "I understand how you feel." No, you don't. You have no idea, and you better hope you never do. Even if you had a child die the precisely same age as your friend's, the nature of your attachment to that child will have been different, the meaning you placed on it, what death means to you, how you interpret the loss, the circumstances of the death – all these things are different. No human can ever really understand how another person feels. What to say instead, "I'm so sorry you're hurting" or "I feel for your pain." Those are accurate statements.

DON'T say "He's with Jesus now" or any sort of dogmatic belief about the afterlife. Even if the parents are Christians and you are, too. This is not the time for you to be preaching – if the parents want that, let them get it from a preacher. There will be enough people around telling them what to believe. Real friends remain quiet. Religious attachment often snaps between fervor and renunciation during the grief process. What the parent believed an hour before the death may not be what they believe now, and your comments about religion are way out of line and will shut down communication at a time when the parent may desperately need to talk without being judged. Making religious comments to a bereaved parent is as stupid and insensitive as someone saying to you, "I'm sorry you lost your arms and legs in that accident, but at least you weigh less now." No parent wants their child with Jesus or anywhere else except safely tucked into their bed tonight.

DON'T say anything at all if you've got nothing to say. There are no words that will truly comfort the parents anyway. There is no language to describe the depths of their pain. There is nothing at all that will comfort them except learning to cope with it a bit at a time over the hard months and years ahead. The best comforters are the people who listen. After our accident, when I was lying for months in a hospital bed recovering from extensive injuries, the best person of all was my friend Sharon Gibbs who came over every few days, sat at my bedside and silently wept with me. I told her the same stories and asked her the same unanswerable questions day after day. She never pretended to have an answer. When I needed to cry and not talk, she just held my hand and kept her lips sealed.

DON'T force yourself on the family, but also, DON'T back too far off. People in grief need practical help and probably can't clearly think about what they need. Strangers keep offering to help them, but that isn't comfortable and probably imposes on their privacy. Help from you, a trusted friend, may not. Be sensitive to their need to be alone and weep. Practical things you can volunteer to do include watching younger children, taking the dog for a walk or a bath, changing the sheets, doing up the dishes, bringing by a hot dinner, watering wilting plants. Some people have the gift of unobtrusively slipping in and just doing things for others. The easiest way is to ask if you can help, or just show up with the dinner. If you ask and the answer is no, try again a day or two later with a specific task you'd like to accomplish for them. They may have forgotten it even exists! Parental grief is like being in the tornado scene in the Wizard of Oz, where things are flying all about and you can't focus on or identify much of anything. The parents are not functioning well in the early stages. Offer practical help.

DON'T hesitate to organize a fund drive, alert the media, ask for a special offering, start a scholarship fund, whatever if the family is in financial crisis because of medical or funeral expenses. But ALWAYS get permission from the parents first.

DON'T ask the parents to focus on anything happy, or to be glad you got a promotion at work, etc. When a child dies, everything else in anyone else's life is obliterated from the radar for a while. Your friend will return to interest in you someday, but it will be a while. After our children died, we got more than 6,000 cards from all over the world because there was a lot of news coverage. A few hundred of them included pictures of other people's happy, healthy,

laughing children with messages like “celebrate with us that our children are alive.” Just as bad, people said, “You’re young. You can have more children.” As if one person could ever replace another!

DON’T take anything the parent says too seriously. It’s a time of unfathomable change, and every emotion in the book. From hating God or you or the cop who knocked on the door and reported the accident, from blaming everyone and their dog, all these wild, crazy emotions are well within the range of normal. It’ll pass.

DON’T equate the death of their child with the death of your precious cat Fluffy. Believe it or not for those who have never been parents, there is absolutely no comparison between having a child and owning an animal. If you really believe your pet was “like a child”, keep it to yourself. The bereaved parents never once left the child in the house alone for six hours with just a bowl of water on the floor.

DON’T give up. After the death, one must usually endure the horrific experience of the funeral. I’ve counseled many parents who, like me, can barely recall that day because it is so gruesome to endure. Afterward, the parent may sink into a black hole. That is your signal to keep leaving caring messages on the answering machine; to keep sending an email “just to say hi and see how you’re doing”; and to not be offended if it takes them a week to answer you. Most importantly, remember to send a card or make a call on the child’s birthdays and the anniversaries of the death. After the funeral, the friends who are not as close as you are tend to drift back to their regular lives. The frenzy of support and love and cards and gentleness quickly dissipates. The bereaved parent may need to go back to work before they are ready. The press of other children might catch them up in stuffing the grief until some imaginary future day. (Print and have them read a copy of the free article on this website “Time for Suffering” if you see that happening – but not until the child has been dead at least a year.) You remembering with them on these particularly awful days will be precious to them.

DON’T take it personally. For the first six months to a year, have a thick skin if your friend says something hurtful about you, your philosophies or beliefs, or anything or anyone else. Let it roll. It takes a long, long time to process that much pain in one’s head, heart and soul, and your friend is vocalizing the anxiety and confusion to you because they trust you. Keep their confidence and you’ll keep the friend.

DON’T hesitate to speak up. Depression, self-isolation, marital strife and divorce are extremely common side effects of child loss. DO urge your friend to seek counseling from a certified grief counselor if you see them slipping into a place of deeper sadness. DO push them to get into couples counseling, or whatever other professional help you see them needing. Of course, do it in a kindly manner, but if you speak up, you might save their marriage, their family or even the rest of their life. It’s worth the risk.

DON’T forget that no one survives these types of extreme crises alone. Your compassion is incredibly valuable and even necessary for their survival. In retrospect, your friend will

appreciate more than you can imagine the love, quiet support and comfort you offered at this time. Even if they can't say it yet, I will on behalf of all of us who've lost children: thank you.

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