

## HELPING OTHERS THROUGH GRIEF – by Donna O’Toole

Most grieving people do not need professional help... they need a friend. Here is a baker’s dozen of ways you can be a friend to someone who is grieving.

1. **Be There.** Grieving people need support and presence much more than advice. It is important to offer support over time.
2. **Initiate and Anticipate.** Intensely grieving people often don’t know or can’t ask for what they need. Suggest times you’d like to visit and ways you’d like to help.
3. **Listen.** Grieving people often need to tell their stories over and over. Listening without judgment or interruption can be the most important gift you can give.



4. **Avoid “Clichés” and Easy Answers.** “I’m sorry”... “I care”... “You’re in my thoughts and prayers” may be the best response. Touch can say in silence what words cannot express.
5. **Silence is Golden.** Sometimes there are no words for grief and no words that bring enough comfort to take away the pain. Silence can demonstrate your trust and acceptance.
6. **Accept and Encourage the Expression of Feelings.** Reassure the person that grief has many feelings ... that feelings are like barometers that indicate our internal weather. Expressing feelings can help change the weather.



7. **Offer Opportunities and Safety for Remembering.** There are many times during grief that remembering helps the healing and growth process. Offer to revisit places and people who can add perspective and confirm the importance of the loss.
8. **Learn About the Grief Process.** It will help with your fears and feelings of helplessness.
9. **Help the Person Find Support and Encouragement.** Help the bereaved person find a variety of support and social activities.
10. **Allow the Person to Grieve at His or Her Own Pace.** Grief is an individual process. Your ability to not judge the length of time it takes will lighten the pressure to conform to other peoples’ needs or ways, and will enhance self-trust.
11. **Be patient.** With yourself and your friend. You may need to give more of yourself than you imagined. Make sure you have means of support and self-care to see you through.
12. **Provide for Times of Lightheartedness.** Grief can be like swimming upstream... sometimes you need to get out of it and recoup. Laughter and diversion are wonderful ways to regain.
13. **Believe in the Person’s Ability to Recover and Grow.** Your hope and faith may be needed when theirs fails. Your trust in the other’s ability to heal is essential. Listen and be with them in emotional pain. DON’T PUSH.

“Don’t walk in front of me... I may not follow. Don’t walk behind me... I may not lead. Walk beside me—and just be my friend.” Cammus

*From “Healing and Growing Through Grief”, 1987, by Donna O’Toole, Rainbow Connection, 477 Hannah Branch Road, Burnsville, N.C., 28714*

## SUPPORTING YOUTH IN GRIEF

Keep in mind that students need or may benefit from any of the following:

**✘ *The truth about what has happened.*** If there are aspects of the death or event which are simply too gory or for some other reason too difficult to talk about, it is better to be honest about that than to whitewash the event with a cover story. This shows respect for the students' integrity as is essential for your credibility.

**✘ *The opportunity to talk about the event as well as other similar events in their lives.*** This helps "normalize" the event as they hear that others, too, have had similar experiences. Too, talking eases the pressure we feel inside.

**✘ *Understanding that this event might be a "trigger" which is causing them to re-experience feelings they had in the past at times of danger, threat, or fear.*** It helps for them to know that this reaction is not unusual for people with something in their histories.

**✘ *Staff and other adults in their lives understanding that, if they come from a dysfunctional home, their abilities to cope with grief is likely diminished.***

**✘ *Being allowed to use the SafeRoom even if they didn't know the deceased.*** Many students will have been triggered by this event and will not be able to focus on school work until they've had the opportunity to process some of the newly reactivated grief. Suspend judgment about who needs to go to the SafeRoom and let the staff there send back students who are not using the grieving process.

**✘ *To find meaning in the event.***

**✘ *Help understanding what to expect at the funeral or memorial service.*** As the details of the service are known, take time to talk with students about whether they've been to a funeral, what

it was like, and what to expect with this one.

**✘ *Continued structure in the schedule for the day.*** It is usually better to continue to have students stay at school, where they can grieve with others. They can benefit from walking through the usual class schedule, and showing up for all or many of their usual classes, because there is a sense of routine. Suspend the academic expectations long enough to process the meaning and impact of the event. In some cases, that may last the whole class period, in others, all day.

**✘ *Consistency in discipline, with flexibility.*** Often at these times, students feel life is out of control. They feel even more unsafe if peers' behavior is not within the usual realm of the classroom. Exceptions may be made in regard to expectations of how much academic work gets done for a day or two, or other aspects of school life which do not put others at risk or leave them feeling a loss of structure.

Students do not need for you to become an instant counselor. They do need for you to "be there for them" by letting them talk about their fears, concerns and feelings. They need to feel safe and not judged. If your school is going through a tragedy or trauma, the first day or two may be a bit of a roller coaster ride with emotions.

Encourage students to:

- ✘ support each other for the next while and help each other get through the day.
- ✘ put extra energy into friendships. Exchange phone numbers with each other.
- ✘ take good care of themselves by eating well and getting lots of rest.

*Crisis management institute 2000 Cheri Lovre, MS*

## **ESPECIALLY FOR TEENS**

(This list developed by teens in Bereavement Support Program, Caledonia Health Care)

### Things that helped me with my grief

- Being acknowledged (knowing people were thinking of me)
- Working (it was often a relief to stay busy)
- Helping (helping others made me feel better)
- Sharing (when friends told me of similar losses, I felt less alone)
- Talking (I was grateful for friends who were willing to listen)
- Crying (it helped loosen up the knots inside me and brought relief)
- Laughing (I learned it was OK to laugh and have a good time, too)
- Hugging (it often meant more than words could say)
- Being with my friends (I like sometimes doing the old, “normal” stuff and getting away from home)
- Being alone (sometimes that’s what I wanted most—there aren’t any rules for grief)

### Things that hurt

- Being avoided (people didn’t know what to say or do)
- Being pushed to talk (sometimes I didn’t feel like talking or didn’t like people being nosy)
- Feeling different (people whispered about me, looked at me. Sometimes I just wanted to forget what had happened and feel normal again)
- Being offered a replacement (like people saying I should get another dog or that my mother should have another baby)
- Not being asked (it hurt when people asked my friends what happened because they were afraid to ask me)
- Being told how to feel (“you shouldn’t cry”, or “don’t be angry”, “you should be over this by now”, “everyone feels that way”)

### Ways you can express sympathy

- Say “I’m sorry this happened to you”. (It is direct and simple)
- Give a hug, take some flowers, bake some cookies, lend a teddy bear
- Listen
- Don’t be afraid to mention the dead person’s name
- Remember to keep in touch
- Find out if he/she wants to do “routine” activities or wants a break
- Don’t act embarrassed if a grieving friend cries OR laughs...just BE there!

### Things that might be a support to grieving teenagers

- Keeping a journal or diary
- Joining a support group of peers who are also grieving
- Writing letters of “regrets and appreciations” to the one who had died

## HOW TO HELP

1. Recognize the warning signs of suicide
2. Believe it!!
3. Be a good listener
4. Don't argue
  - ◆ Do not say, "You are better off than most people," or "Think of what you'll do to your family!"
5. Ask questions
  - ◆ "Are you thinking of committing suicide?"
  - ◆ Do not say, "You're not thinking of committing suicide, are you?"
6. Do not give false reassurances
  - ◆ "You don't mean that." Avoid clichés like: "All people have problems." Or "Look on the bright side."
7. Identify the source of stress
  - ◆ "What's been happening to you lately?"
8. Identify support systems
  - ◆ "Is there anyone you can turn to?"
9. Evaluate the seriousness of the suicide risk from **MAYBE** thinking about suicide to a definite plan with access to a lethal weapon
10. Don't leave the suicidal person alone in a high risk situation
11. Get help!!
  - ◆ **Do not try to handle a severely depressed or suicidal person by yourself** or with other students. If you **suspect** someone is suicidal you must report it to a responsible adult. A counselor, teacher, parent, principal, or a minister can help
12. Continue to show support and concern



**Never Promise Confidentiality!!!  
Don't Keep Secrets – Tell!!!**

## TEENAGE SUICIDE PREVENTION

MYTH: Those who talk about suicide rarely attempt or commit suicide

FACT: 75% of the young people who committed suicide gave repeated warning signs and verbal clues.

MYTH: The tendency toward suicide is inherited

FACT: There is no evidence of a genetic predisposition toward suicide, but young people are suggestible and have followed behaviors modeled by others close to them

MYTH: "Nothing could have stopped her once she decided to take her life."

FACT: Most adolescents who consider suicide have mixed feelings about the desire to live and the desire to die. (They may experience hopelessness but at the same time want to be rescued.)

### COMMON SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS OF DEPRESSION

<u>Physical Changes</u>	<u>Cognitive Changes</u>
Sleep disorder Eating disorder Constipation/headaches/ Stomach upset Menstrual irregularity Weight loss/weight gain Weakness Easily fatigued Pain, unexplained origin Diminished sexual interest Loss of interest in usual activity Posture, speech, gait, hygiene	Negative self concept Negative view of the world Negative expectations for the future ◆ Self Blame Self-criticism Indecisiveness Helplessness Worthlessness Delusions (of guilt, sin, worthlessness)
<u>Emotional Changes</u>	<u>Behavioral Changes</u>
Sadness Guilt Anxiety Anger Mood Swings	Crying Withdrawal Retardation Agitation Hallucinations

## SUICIDE DANGER SIGNALS

Recent Loss



Suicide Threat

Previous Attempt

Mental Depression

Helplessness

Withdrawal and Isolation

A Sudden Forced Cheerfulness After  
a Period of Depression



Drug and Alcohol Use

Marked Changes in Behavior or Personality

Preparing for Death  
(i.e. Giving Away Possessions,  
Making a Will,  
Writing Farewell Letters,  
Gathering pills or Saying Good-Bye)



Accident Proneness/Risk Taking