



Learn to help

How to support a grieving parent Aetna Resources For LivingSM

When someone you know loses a child, it can be hard to know what to say or how to respond. You may be afraid of saying or doing the wrong thing. We've put together some tips so you can help a grieving parent.

Acknowledge the loss

It's normal to be afraid of making the bereaved parents feel worse. Try not to let your fear keep you from supporting them.

Avoid saying or doing nothing or staying away from the bereaved parents because you're uncomfortable. Failing to acknowledge the loss or avoiding them can be a hurtful response.

Instead, check in with the parents. And check in often. Let them cry (it's okay if you cry with them). Let the parents know you're thinking of them. You can write personal notes, call or send flowers.

Listen

A lot of times we feel compelled to "fix" problems. You see a friend upset and you want to make it better. But losing a child is a problem that cannot be fixed. Some efforts to make bereaved parents feel better can be hurtful, not helpful.

Before saying something, ask yourself, "Am I trying to make the person feel better?" or "Am I making this about me?" This is a situation where you can't make things better. The best thing you can do is let bereaved parents have their feelings and listen.

Avoid saying "I know how you feel," "I can relate" or talking about yourself. Even if you've lost a child, grief varies greatly from person to person.

Instead, say "I can't imagine what you're going through," "How are you feeling?" or "I'm here to listen." This lets the parents know you can be present and supportive, no matter what.

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Avoid saying “Your child is in a better place,” “It was meant to be,” “You still have your other children,” or “You’re so strong.” It may be tempting to look for something positive in this loss. But this can be insensitive to the parents’ grief.

Instead, say “You don’t have to be brave right now.” Giving parents room to be sad, scared and needy is one of the best things you can do. Let them know they don’t have to act strong all the time.

Let the grief happen

Grief looks different for each person. You may have had a significant loss, maybe even the loss of a child. But it’s important to respect people’s need to grieve in their own way. Grief changes people. Instead of denying it, try to make space for grief in your relationship.

Avoid saying “Time heals all,” “You’ll move on,” or “You need to get on with your life.” These statements are simply untrue when it comes to losing a child.

Instead, know that grief is ongoing and transforms with time. Grieving parents are forever changed. Know that their behavior, routines and needs might shift unexpectedly. Allow them to work through this loss in their own way.

Avoid judging or having expectations of how the person should grieve.

Instead, remind parents that grieving is personal. Let them know there’s no timeline for grief and there’s no “right” way to do it. Encourage them to be kind to themselves. Give them space to feel their feelings — whatever they might be.

Provide support

Grieving parents can have a hard time asking for help. They may not be able to tell you what they need. But you can still provide support through caring gestures, even a year or more after the child’s passing.

Avoid saying “Call me if you need anything.”

Instead, say “I’ll check in with you from time to time to see if you need any help” or make specific offers. Say “I’m bringing you dinner on Thursday,” “Can I come babysit on Saturday?” or “I’d like to take your dog to the dog park this weekend.” Give a housecleaning gift certificate, offer to go run errands or donate to a memorial in the child’s name.

Talk about the child

Sometimes people fear that talking about the child or the child’s death will make parents sad. They’re worried about reminding parents that their child passed away. But the truth is, parents cannot forget the loss of their child. Nor do they want to. In fact, remembering the child is very important. Bereaved parents want to know their child isn’t forgotten.

Avoid changing the subject when the child is mentioned or his or her name comes up.

Instead, use the child’s name. Ask to see pictures of the child. Try to remember the parents on important days such as birthdays, Mother’s Day, Father’s Day and at other difficult times.

It can be hard to see someone you care about go through the loss of a child. But your support can make a difference. Know that sometimes, it’s the simple things you say or do that mean a lot.

You can call us 24/7 for in-the-moment emotional support.

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