

# Supporting Those Who Grieve

How can we effectively support those who grieve? We all want to see a friend, family member, co-worker or employee begin to feel in control of their life again. The caring presence of another human being is known to be one of the most important supports a grieving person can have. The type of relationship you have with the grieving person may suggest what supportive role is appropriate. It may not be possible for you to meet all of the support needs of a grieving person. Even so, you may be able to refer them to where they can get that support. Here are some practical suggestions on how to be supportive.

**Allow and encourage survivors to talk about their loss.** Talking about the loss on detail, and as often as is needed is an important part of healing. A grieving person may need to "flush out" difficult emotions by going over the story of what happened again and again. Most grieving persons find it painful when friends or co-workers choose not to mention the loss. One woman commented, "They made me feel like my son never existed."

If a survivor is not ready to talk about the loss, you can still establish yourself as someone who is willing to listen whenever that person is ready. Some of us are afraid we will make a grieving person cry or feel worse if we mention the loss. Tears are healing. Talking about our grief generally lightens the load even as it brings up strong emotions. If survivors have limited opportunities to talk about their loss, encourage them to join a support group or consider counseling.

**Help the grieving person identify and accept the many feelings that make up the grief process.** Many grieving persons may be uncomfortable with some of their feelings, such as rage, or relief. They may question whether these feelings are normal. It is essential that they get solid information on the grief process by talking to another person who has been through the experience, joining a support group, reading handouts or books, listening to tapes about the grief process, or talking to a counselor who is experienced in grief related issues.

**Give the grieving person permission to grieve in their own way.** Each person grieves differently and needs to be encouraged to respect their own limits, timetables and, gut feelings about what they are ready to handle. Survivors get a lot of unsolicited and confused advice about what they should be doing or feeling. Grieving people often need permission to not be okay. In a society where we control, grievers often have unrealistic ideas about how well they should be doing. Grief hurts, and hurts for a long time.

**Be available over time.** Grieving persons need support through the first year and at the anniversary of the death. Much of the hardest grieving begins

after a few months. Birthdays and wedding anniversaries can be difficult. The greatest need for support often comes at a point when offers of support have significantly slacked off.

**Reinforce that grief affects health and encourage self-care activities.**

Fatigue, loss of concentration and changes in appetite are just a few of the common physical symptoms of grief. Survivors often feel reassured after a thorough physical exam and should be encouraged to have one in the months after a loss. Exercise, attention to healthy eating and adequate rest are important. Medication that alters moods should be taken conservatively under a doctor's close supervision. The use of excessive drugs or alcohol only delays the grieving process. Encourage the grieving person to make his or her own needs a priority.