



Children's Cancer Research Fund[®]

how to respond &
be there for someone
experiencing grief

INTRO

Our instinct to lessen someone's grief is good but not actually possible.

“I’m so sorry for your loss.” These are the words we automatically turn to when someone tells us they’ve lost someone. These words are a good start, but we often find ourselves grasping for more. We want to say something to take away the person’s pain or show them how to feel better. These are good instincts, but impossible to fulfill.

TO UNDERSTAND THIS AND KNOW WHAT TO RESPOND WE’LL COVER



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PART 1: WHAT GRIEF IS NOT

1 GRIEF IS NOT A PROBLEM TO BE SOLVED OR FIXED

Grief, like love, is a deep emotion that we all experience differently. Grief no more needs a solution than love needs a solution. Grief that comes because of the loss of a loved one cannot be fixed, because the reason for that grief cannot be fixed. Someone who was once there is gone – that's a fact that can't be changed.

WHY WE THINK THIS: If we're not the one experiencing the grief, all we see is the pain the other person is experiencing. We want that pain to go away for them – we want to fix it.

2

GRIEF IS NOT SOMETHING FROM WHICH TO RECOVER

To recover means to go back to the way things were. Just as you can't recover an amputated limb, we can't recover from the loss of a loved one. But we can learn to integrate the loss into our lives.

WHY WE THINK THIS: Phrases like “time heals all wounds” add to the misunderstanding that grief is like the common cold – that all you can do is wait to recover.

“

There are wounds in life that can be overcome – transformed through hard self-work. Grief is not one of them.

”

– MEGAN DEVINE, AUTHOR OF
“IT’S OKAY YOU’RE NOT OKAY”.

3

GRIEF IS NOT A DISEASE OR MENTAL ILLNESS TO BE CURED

Grieving people aren't sick. The pain of grief is normal, therefore it cannot be cured. However, it does need to be tended to.

WHY WE THINK THIS: Grief can look a lot like depression – they both involve intense sadness and can lead to other symptoms like insomnia and poor appetite. But there are key differences. For example, intense waves of grief are often triggered by thoughts or reminders of its cause, like a diagnosis day, anniversary or birthday.

Depression tends to be more persistent, regardless of what's going on around the person. If a loved one's grief starts to look more like depression, you may want to encourage them to seek professional help.





PART 2: WHAT GRIEF IS



**GRIEF IS A HARD THING TO PUT YOUR FINGER ON,
SO LET'S START WITH THE BASIC DEFINITION:**

Grief is the psychological-emotional experience following a loss of any kind (relationship, status, job, house, game, income, etc.). It's an experience, an emotion, much like love.

1 **GRIEF IS A PART OF LOVE**

Just as love happens deeply, so does grief.

2 **GRIEF IS SOMETHING TO SURVIVE AND INTEGRATE INTO LIFE**

American culture isn't great at recognizing grief for what it really is – a difficult yet normal part of our experience as humans. The more we fight it or deny its place in our lives, the less integrated we will be.

3 **GRIEF IS DIFFERENT FOR EVERYONE**

No two people experience grief the same way, even if it is caused by the same loss or tragedy. It all depends on their relationship with the person, the circumstances of the event, their support system and their own personality.

4 **GRIEF IS SOMETHING THAT CHANGES WITH TIME**

A person's grief in the first week, month or year can be vastly different from their experience 5 or 10 years beyond their loss.



I love the word ‘experience’ because it doesn’t turn grief into something ugly that inhibits us from being where we are supposed to be. It neutralizes it and turns it into something that simply is.

– LAURA SOBIECH, MOM TO ZACH WHO PASSED AWAY IN 2013
AND AUTHOR OF “FLY A LITTLE HIGHER – HOW GOD ANSWERED A MOM’S SMALL PRAYER IN A BIG WAY”





PART 3: HOW TO RESPOND



ACCORDING TO AUTHOR MEGAN DEVINE, YOUR ROLE AS A FRIEND TO SOMEONE IN GRIEF IS TO BECOME THEIR CAST.

You can't do the healing for them – only they can do that. Your role is to become the cast for their broken bone of grief – you offer protection and a safe place to heal.

Humans heal in the context of their relationships – families, loved ones, support groups, religious communities, professional therapists and more. These people form the “cast” that can provide external support so a wound can go about the intricate, complex and difficult process of proper, integrated healing.

HOW TO BE THE CAST

1 SLOW DOWN, LISTEN, & PREPARE YOUR HEART TO FEEL THE PAIN

It's natural to want to jump in and comfort your friend with platitudes, before their pain really seeps into you. Resist this. Hold back all the "helping" and comfort-giving you will naturally want to pour out. Witnessing someone else's grief is painful but so, so important. Show the person that you care through your willingness to listen. Don't try to fix it, just feel it for a moment.



2 CHECK YOURSELF FOR SELFISH MOTIVES

Grief can trigger feelings you didn't expect. You may want to search for a reason why this bad thing happened and subconsciously reassure yourself that it can't happen to you or your family. Ask yourself, "Am I just saying this to make me feel better?"

EXAMPLES OF SELFISH COMMENTS:

"A few months after my mom's sudden passing, I ran into an old colleague of hers at a conference. When she asked about my mom and I told her she had died, the woman asked, 'Was she still overweight?' She was trying to rationalize why what happened to my mom wouldn't happen to her." – Katrina

"Often when telling people that my sister has passed away, they ask, 'Were you two close?' I feel like saying, 'Yes, we were, but would it have made you feel better if I said we hadn't been close?' That's not the kind of question that helps someone who is grieving." – Lauren

"'They should have fed him more broccoli,' one woman said after my son Zach was diagnosed with cancer. I felt angry, judged and annoyed. I think sometimes in order to keep the crazy away we convince ourselves it can't possibly happen to us." – Laura Sobiech

3

BE OPEN AND VULNERABLE

Are you feeling awkward and unsure of what to say? Say, “I don’t know how to do this, but I love you enough to be awkward.” Grieving people would much rather you stumble through than confidently sweep in with fixes.

4

BE OKAY WITH REJECTION

We’re human – we don’t always know the perfect thing to say. The most important thing is not to drift away or stay silent. Silence is much more painful for those in grief than your awkward fumbling is for you. Silence makes the grieving person feel forgotten.

5

LISTEN WITHOUT TRYING TO FORM A RESPONSE

When you try to find something to say while your friend is talking, you’re building a wall to protect yourself from their grief, and they can tell. Listen closely, acknowledge the pain and pause before you formulate any kind of response.

6

RESIST THE URGE TO COMPARE THEIR EXPERIENCE TO YOURS

This is a natural instinct as we search for a way to empathize, but no two grief experiences are the same. Comparing turns the focus on you and loads another sad story onto the grieving person’s shoulders. It’s better to simply listen.



It's scary and messy to wade into the depths of grief with your friend, but it's so important and appreciated. Just remember: Listen, acknowledge, don't fix. Be a safe place for the healing to happen.

PHRASES TO START WITH

“I love you and I hate that this is happening to you.” “This really sucks and you don't deserve it.”

Reason: It's simple, honest, and it recognizes the pain without trying to fix it.

“Would it be okay for me to bring a meal for your family this weekend?”

Reason: This offers a specific thing you can do to alleviate the suffering, but doesn't pretend that this will fix everything.

PHRASES TO AVOID

“You're so strong.” or “You're a warrior.”

Reason: “I didn't like the ‘cancer warrior’ statements because Zach didn't want to be a warrior – he just wanted to be a teenager.” – Laura Sobiech

“At least...” or “You should be...”

Reason: “Someone said to me, ‘You should be grateful that at least you got to say goodbye.’ Grieving people don't have to feel grateful, but often times they are grateful for many things. This comment felt like a scold, like I wasn't measuring up, and it wasn't helpful.” – Laura Sobiech

MAIN TAKEAWAY

“The evidence of ‘helping’ is not in the reduction of pain; it’s in knowing the grieving person feels supported and acknowledged in their pain.”

– MEGAN DEVINE, AUTHOR OF “IT’S OK THAT YOU’RE NOT OK”

Many of the concepts in this PDF are learnings from the book “It’s OK That You’re Not OK” by Megan Devine. If you’re interested in learning more we highly recommend this book for understanding grief.