

## Let's Talk: Helping Parents Who Are Grieving

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In many fields such as child protection, child safety or medicine, professionals may encounter parents who have faced the incomprehensible pain of losing a child. However, these difficult encounters occur in our personal lives as well, and people are often left to question the best way to speak to someone who is grieving when they themselves are at a loss for words. Supporting family, friends or others through effective and empathetic communication is not an easy task, but there are useful skills derived from social work practice that can be applied to nearly all situations that may involve a parent who has experienced a loss.

### **Empathy**

To empathize with another person, it is important to first understand the person's situation to the best of one's ability, so to feel *with* the person, foresee their needs, and "meet them where they are at." This does not, however, mean to pity a friend or client that is grieving, rather to take their perspective and place yourself in their shoes so to strive to feel what they are feeling. When it comes to useful social work-based skills that can apply to everyone, we must first outline what exactly a grief-stricken parent may be undergoing to best understand the meaning and purpose of effective communication.

### **What does grief look like?**

Grief, of course, varies and by nature looks different in every situation as it is one of the most personally complex and individualized emotional experiences one can undergo in life, so delineating every single feature of grief is nearly impossible. However, there are certain signals that we can be sensitive to in order to respond effectively and begin to understand what the person grieving is going through.

As one mother noted, grief is indeed a process, and there is "no way around it or over it; you just have to go through it" (Janet McGee, mother of [Ted](#)).

According to psychologist and grief specialist J. William Worden (2002), there are four processes that take place when adjusting oneself while grieving, which include the following: recognizing the loss, undergoing and working through the emotional pain, making an effort to search for meaning in life, and finally moving forward emotionally. The most important factor in these processes is remembering that grief is not something that happens to someone passively; it reflects something that someone does. And so, when interacting meaningfully with someone who is grieving, the purpose is to provide companionship, and to genuinely and authentically accompany them on their journey. Choosing to guide or attempting to relieve someone's grief places an immense burden in depriving parents the crucial need to verbalize and express their grief on their terms.

## **Show up, be present**

Generally, people may think that because they cannot relieve someone else's pain, their efforts may be futile, but the individual grieving can experience the pain of loss while simultaneously feeling supported by friends and loved ones. When it comes to companionship that offers support, it may look different depending on each relationship, but the key is to be present. Bearing witness to the struggles of grief and pain is also important to keep in mind as is learning to be comfortable with silence. In social work interviews, clinicians may be met with a moment or two in which the client cannot bring themselves to speak and sitting with the silence is elementary. The same can be said for moments of tremendous emotional release and being present as another person cries is just as important. Likewise, the same practices are useful in everyday interactions with those who are grieving a loss.

As McGee noted, "instead of asking, 'How are you doing?' you might consider asking, 'How are you doing TODAY?'" Just listening and being present is one of the best gifts you can give a grieving parent." As grieving parents are adapting to a new life without their child, friends can help to provide a routine as companionship is essential to keeping busy and maintaining a productive life.

## **Remember, don't forget**

Moreover, being reliably present means to walk alongside what the griever is experiencing and honor the child who has died rather than feeling as though as you cannot speak of the deceased or recognize birthdays or anniversaries. In fact, the parent likely wants to remember his or her child, and if you have a humorous or pleasant anecdote to share, then do so. This helps to preserve their memory as parents want their child's life to matter. Talking about the child is also an integral step in Worden's grief process, namely the first stage of accepting the loss. So too, embracing the resulting pain is made easier when one can express their emotions with someone who knew the child.

As Lisa Siefert (mother of [Shane](#), who died when a dresser tipped on him) remarked, "There are some wrong things to say: "time will heal all wounds," "God must have needed another angel," or "at least you have [name of other child]." All of these have been said to me, and while I know the folks were well-intentioned, it is best to avoid platitudes like this. I want to talk about Shane as much as you want to talk about your children. I know that you think of Shane too. It's especially touching when you remember every year."

## **Actively listen**

Moreover, part of being present means to actively listen, both with one's mind and also heart, but without judgement. Rather than feel overwhelmed with not knowing what to say, attend to what the person is communicating, verbally and nonverbally, and listen to the words being shared with you. By actively listening, you are also conveying your compassion by giving

permission to express vulnerability without having to fear being criticized or judged. We may feel as though we want to offer advice or constructive directions, but we actually must strive to understand rather than execute instructions. Be sensitive when someone grieving wants to be left alone and be mindful that a wide array of emotions is expected as grief is a “huge melting pot of positive and negative feelings.” Again, focus on *being* rather than *doing*. Ask what they need rather than assume you have the right advice, and abstain from preconceived notions about what grief should look like or how long it should last.

All of these steps which involve engaging in empathetic conversations, being present, and actively listening are useful tools that can make all the difference when it comes to supporting grieving parents and each individual’s journey.

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