



CHOICES

Empowering People

Spring/Summer 2017

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Grief Needs a Thousand Tellings

Everyone experiences grief at some point in their lives—it's part of being human. Yet, most of us don't know how to respond to grief when it affects our friends and family. Friends mean well, but when grief engulfs someone you care about, what's the best thing to say or do to help them through their darkest time?

Coping with grief isn't taught in schools or the workplace. However, in many cities and towns, you'll find a hospice nearby that offers grief or bereavement support to community residents, not just those who had family members or loved ones in hospice care.

Hospices provide individual and group grief counseling. Many also offer support groups for spouses, parents, adult children, teens, and kids. Some provide specialized programs, for example, Hospice of Santa Cruz County has offered programs focused on coping with the holidays, art therapy, cooking for one, and walking with grief, as well as bereavement camps for children.

Leading these support groups are volunteers like Debbie Gissing at Hospice of Santa Cruz County and Sally Dickey at Hospice By The Sea. They have wisdom to share about helping those coping with loss.

The path to becoming a grief support volunteer

When Sally's husband died in hospice care, a volunteer told her to go to a bereavement group right away. Sally asked how soon "right away" was. The volunteer replied, "Tomorrow." After attending that group for a year, Sally wanted to lead a group herself for Hospice By The Sea. Before taking on this new volunteer role, she completed a training program in grief and bereavement support and became state-certified.

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Grief, cont'd.

Debbie learned Hospice of Santa Cruz County needed volunteers and, having a social work degree, thought it'd be a good fit. She started out by visiting hospice patients—an experience that served as a foundation for her next volunteer role in grief support. “I saw grief start while the patient was alive. Anticipatory grief begins with the diagnosis. The ripple effect of losses sets in as the patient declines,” said Debbie. Wanting to learn more about the grieving process, she attended grief support training for individuals and then a second training for group support.

Finding understanding and connection in grief support groups

Hospice care is a holistic approach to healthcare that helps patients and families live together at the end of life. After the patient dies, hospice continues to provide care to the patient's family by offering grief counseling and support groups.

In grief support groups, people have the opportunity to tell their story by talking about whom they lost and what that loss means to them. “The focus is on the person in the group and their recovery,” said Sally. She gave group members a journal to capture daily thoughts. “They loved that book and read it to each other every week,” she said. “They realized they're not alone. People who understand what they're going through are paying attention to them.”

“Grief comes from feeling disconnected. But in the room, there's a common thread pulling and holding us together, and a trust in the group process,” said Debbie. “To come into a group and have that connected feeling for an hour at least—that creates healing.”

Grief support volunteering: it's not what you'd expect

Wanting to be a grief support volunteer is a choice that others don't always understand. People say to Debbie, “You must like being around sadness.” Or, “How can you do that, it must be awful.” Her response: “That's not how it is. It's not sad work. It's heart work.”

Sally said her group laughed, cried, and discussed everything imaginable. She left each week feeling energized. “The experience shows you a different side of life and of yourself,” she said. “It draws out of you what you feel they need to hear, sometimes your own experiences, and it draws out of them what they need to share.”

After ten years leading her group, Sally recently decided to “retire.” She said they “had a fit,” but several of them formed a lunch group which she occasionally attends. Although in her 80s, it's more appropriate to call her “semi-retired” because she still volunteers monthly at the hospice to help with the bereavement newsletter. And, she talks with people where she lives “who are ill, scared, or curious about the journey ahead of



Debbie Gissing, a volunteer at Hospice of Santa Cruz, provides grief support to individuals and in a group setting. About being a grief support volunteer, Debbie said, “It's not sad work. It's heart work.”

them.”

Advice for helping a grieving friend

What's the best thing to do for a friend in grief? Sally said, “Get them to talk about the person they lost and how they're feeling about that loss.” Debbie referred to an old saying: “Grief needs a thousand tellings.” People in grief think their friends are tired of hearing their story. “But, they're not finished telling. Be there to listen,” she said.

People in grief often feel stifled about sharing their loss because friends want them to move on and feel better. “It's hard to see people we care about in pain. Friends worry about the right thing to say because we want to fix the situation,” said Debbie. “Accept you're going to screw it up sometimes and say the wrong things. Just keep showing up and listening.”

Friends ask grievers what they need. Debbie said, “Sometimes grievers don't know what they need. Find ways to help without waiting to be asked.” You can start by pointing them in the direction of your community's hospice. “Encourage them to go to a grief support group,” said Sally. “Grief support gives them a place to tell their stories over and over,” said Debbie.

Deirdre Reid is a writer based outside Raleigh, NC at deidreid.com.

Supporting Someone Who is Grieving

Often people feel unsure about how to help someone who is grieving after a death. What most people need after a loss is comfort and caring from family and friends. Listening, running errands or simply being present are a few examples of how you might support a grieving person.

The following are possible ways you might be of help during this stressful time:

Listen

As Debbie and Sally counseled, listening is a gift you can give someone who is grieving. Ask them to tell you about the person who died. Encourage them to talk about their relationship and their memories. Respond to emotions as they arise, try to be comfortable with tears, and take time to listen.

Accept all feelings

Expressing emotions is a natural and necessary part of the grief process. Do not pass judgment on how “well” the grieving person is or is not coping. Everyone grieves in their own way, and in their own time.

Offer hope

Many people who are grieving have difficulty imagining they will ever be happy again. Believing in your friend or relative’s ability to get through this time will strengthen them. In time, with your support, they will rediscover their own inner strengths.

Respect individual needs

Someone who is grieving may want to spend time alone. The person may decline offers to visit or may not return phone calls. These are signals that the person may need to withdraw for a while; it is important to respect their need for privacy.

Understand and accept cultural and religious perspectives about death that may be different from your own.

It is important to understand that the way someone experiences loss may be shaped by cultural, religious and family traditions. Many cultures and religions have specific rituals when a person dies. Interfering with, restricting or judging these practices may complicate the grief process.

Avoid clichés

It is common to feel helpless when you care about the person who is grieving. Although you may be tempted to say something you think might be helpful, it is better to err on the side of listening. Avoid clichés such as: “At least he didn’t suffer,” “I know how you feel,” “God won’t give you more than you can handle.” It is best to be honest and say “I don’t know what to say” or “I’m so sorry.”

Make specific offers of help

Instead of saying “please call me if I can help,” it is best to offer to help with a specific chore such as caring for a child, preparing a meal, running errands, doing housework, helping with yard work, or shopping. For example, suggest “I’ll bring dinner on Thursday, how many people will be there?” If Thursday doesn’t work, ask what night will.

Specific offers of help are less stressful to the grieving person, as the person does not have to spend time thinking of a response to an open ended question such as “What can I do to help you?”

Help the person ease back into activities

When they seem ready, help the person renew interest in past activities and hobbies or discover new interests. An example is, “Would you like to go to the museum on Saturday to see the new exhibit?” The person may not feel ready to do what you asked, so understand if your offer is declined and ask again after some time has passed.

Remember to check on your friend or relative as time passes and months go by.

Periodic check-ins can be helpful throughout the first two years after the death. Stay in touch by writing a note, calling, stopping by to visit, or perhaps bringing flowers.

Be sensitive to holidays and special days

For someone grieving a death, certain days may be more difficult and can magnify the sense of loss. Anniversaries and birthdays can be especially hard. Some people find it helpful to be with family and friends, others may wish to avoid traditions and try something different. Extend an invitation to someone who might otherwise spend time alone during a holiday or special day, and recognize they may or may not accept your offer.

If you think your friend or family member needs more help than you can offer, talk to him or her about contacting a local hospice. Hospices offer grief support to anyone in the community who has had a loss through death, not just to those who were cared for by hospice. Hospice has bereavement professionals that specialize in grief and loss and can offer further suggestions or sources of support. Hospice can also provide guidance or resources on how to support others who are grieving. To find a hospice in your area, or for more information, visit www.calhospice.org or call us at 888-252-1010.



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New Website!

We have merged the content of our two websites into one and revamped the layout so that it's easier for you to access information!

Finding a hospice has never been easier. When you visit calhospice.org, you will instantly have access to our hospice directory. Just click on 'search counties' to find a hospice in your area.

Additionally, the website is a terrific resource for many of your questions on:

- Palliative Care
- Choosing a Hospice
- Hospice Eligibility and Payment, including Medicare, Medical and insurance

Check it out at calhospice.org!

CHAPCA HOSPICE PROGRAMS & SERVICES MEMBERSHIP HOW TO HELP ABOUT US

The California Hospice and Palliative Care Association

The majority of Americans say they would prefer to be cared for and die at home and yet only 38% of us receive hospice care.

FIND A HOSPICE
SEARCH COUNTIES SEARCH A-Z

FIND A HOSPICE CONSULTANT OR SERVICE
SEARCH SERVICES SEARCH A-Z

Reach for the Stars: A Hospice

California Hospice and Palliative Care Association
Annual Conference and

ANNOUNCEMENTS
Exhibitor Registration Now Open!
Exhibit registration is now open! Visit our exhibit webpage... [More »](#)
New Webinars Added