

The Etiquette of Illness and Grief – Tip Sheet

“When we suffer loss or face difficulties of any kind, there is a real desire deep in most people for human connection.” Sheryl Sandberg, *Option B*

Do you know someone who is living with a life-threatening illness or grieving the death of a loved one? Have you ever felt tongue-tied about what to say, how to behave, or what to do to support them? Following are some tips about how to support in a spirit of compassion, kindness and care:

- When deciding what to say or do, consider the nature of your relationship with the person (family, deep friendship or acquaintance), cultural/family norms, and your self-knowledge (personality, economic ability, time limits, etc.). Even a small, timely gesture of care can be comforting.
- It is the role of the well person to make the first contact; don't wait too long to call, email, text or write a card. Think about what you like about the person and name the quality(ies) in the message. Don't necessarily expect to receive a response.
- Offer acts of kindness within the nature of your relationship that might include bringing meals, shopping for groceries, household chores, taking care of pets, taking children for outings, babysitting, rides to appointments, social outings, thoughtful gifts, etc. Make the offer light, clear and easy to access.
- If the person shares tumultuous emotions with you like anger, sadness, grief, and fear, remain quiet and listen with compassion and kindness. The feelings need expression and it's a privilege to be trusted with them.

Helpful Things to Say:

I don't know what to say but I just had to call you.
Just thinking of you; feel free to call back if you wish – no pressure.
How is your day going today?
I'm so sorry this is happening to you.
I keep remembering the time we ...
I look forward to being with you again.
It's not fair.
Is it OK if I text from time to time?
Say nothing ... offer listening presence & hug.

Unhelpful Things to Say:

You've got to be strong.
You've got to get [that treatment].
You must stop crying, it's time to move on.
S/he lived such a long life.
S/he is in a better place.
S/he would not want you to be sad.
There is a reason for everything.
It's part of a bigger plan.
I know exactly how you feel.

For further information or to access spiritual care or bereavement support, contact:



855 Matheson Blvd. East, Unit #1, Mississauga, ON L4W 4L6
(905) 712-8119, Ext. 232 or 247

Grief 101 – Tip Sheet

Based on the Work of Dr. Alan D. Wolfelt

Following are some themes in grief and tips about how to support yourself when you are grieving the death of a loved one:

1. Grief is a normal, natural and necessary part of human life - not an illness or a disease – and does not need to be “fixed” or “cured.”
2. Grief is the collection of thoughts, feelings and emotions that a person feels inwardly when s/he has experienced loss. The “work of mourning” is the outward expression of one’s thoughts, feelings and emotions in grief. This outward expression can be through sharing the story verbally with at least one trusted person ... and/or non-verbally through art, music, journaling, poetry, reading and/or rituals. Feel free to find your own unique way of processing your feelings.
3. Often described as an “emotional roller coaster” of feelings like sadness, fear, anger, helplessness, loneliness and guilt, the beginning dimensions of grief mostly feel like shock, numbness and disbelief. This “nature’s anaesthetic” wears off at different times for each person as the reality of the loss sets in. Begin to develop a circle of “grief buddies” to call when needed.
4. Grief requires “safe spaces” to process thoughts and feelings without judgment so that reconciliation and acceptance are possible. Begin to develop “safe spaces” within your circle of family and friends or professionally with grief counselors and/or bereavement support groups.
5. Grief is unique for each person; you are the “expert” of your grief experience. While others may offer advice, only you know how you are doing at all times.
6. There are no predictable, orderly stages to grief; there is no “right” or “wrong” way to grieve.
7. You may feel physically exhausted with changes in sleep and appetite. Get plenty of rest and see your doctor if needed.
8. Grief takes a person from an “old normal” for life to a “new normal” for life and there are no rewards for speed. Take as long as you need to process the loss. The goal of grief is NOT to “get over” your loved one’s death but rather to continue the relationship in memory. You are invited to embrace all memories of the past in order to move into your future.
9. Foundational to all grief work is self-care and compassion. Find your own way to care for yourself including meditation, prayer, ritual, yoga, reiki, Therapeutic Touch, massage, social life, etc.
10. When grief has an opportunity to be fully expressed, life can feel good again in a new way.

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