

HELPING PEOPLE AFTER A LOSS

Throughout our lifetime, many of us will experience loss or trauma, or at least know someone that does. Our own personal experiences, uncertainty, and fear can leave us feeling unprepared or hesitant to respond or interact with those who have experienced a loss. The personal experiences of those who have experienced loss offer valuable insights. Below are some suggestions for how to practice “The Art of Presence” when someone you know has been impacted by loss or a traumatic event.

Do Be There. Sometimes we assume that people need space or time to “sort things out” after a loss or trauma. It can also feel scary to approach people who are hurting and we may feel busy with our own lives. Reaching out and showing up through phone calls, letters, and personal visits demonstrates care and concern, something that is often deeply appreciated by those experiencing grief.

Don't Compare. Avoid say things like “I understand what it's like to lose a child. My dog died, and that was hard too.” Comparisons take the focus off the individual that is hurting and put it onto you. They are often perceived as careless or false and those coping with loss will rarely experience comparisons as helpful.

Do Bring Soup. Non-verbal expressions of care can be very healing. Bringing food or other essentials, particularly if you observe a specific need the person may have, can be helpful and perceived as caring.

Don't Say “You'll Get Over It.” Most people that have experienced trauma or loss indicate there is no such thing as ‘getting over it’. For those impacted, a major disruption often creates a new concept of what is normal in their lives with no real going ‘back to the old me’.

Do Be a Builder. People who have dealt with loss might distinguish between firefighters and builders. Firefighters

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will drop everything and arrive at the moment of crisis. Builders are there for years and years, walking alongside as those affected live out their lives in the world. People who are trying to assist may feel drawn to one of those two roles; offering both can be very helpful.

Don't Try to Make Sense of What Happened. Comments like

“It's all for the best”, “There must be a reason this happened” or other explanations can be experienced as hurtful.

Achievement-oriented cultures are often focused on solving problems or repairing brokenness. Sitting quietly with someone who is suffering through pain and uncomfortable feelings grants them the dignity of their own process and affords them the respect of ultimately determining the meaning.

In addition to the suggestions above, the basic principles of Psychological First Aid can provide additional help in guiding our interactions. These principles create and sustain an environment of (1) safety, (2) calming, (3) connectedness to others, (4) self-empowerment, and (5) hopefulness. When our words and actions foster these things, it helps those dealing with loss or trauma to feel supported and assists them in dealing with a difficult situation.

Adapted from an article by David Brooks in the New York Times on January, 20th 2014.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/21/opinion/brooks-the-art-of-presence.html>

Resource

Psychological First Aid

<https://www.cstsonline.org/resources/resource-master-list/psychological-first-aid>