

Being There: A Guide for Family and Friends



LOMA LINDA
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Being There

The unthinkable has happened. A precious child has died. Someone very special to you is grieving. You want to be there because you truly care, but supporting grieving parents can feel overwhelming. We hope the following pages will help you so you can be there for your friends and loved ones during this most difficult time.

First, know that you will not be able to take away their pain.

We grieve because we love deeply, and when we lose someone precious to us, we need to have the opportunity and freedom to express our feelings.

You do not need to come up with just the right thing to say, and you do not need to try to make things better.

Simple expressions of care are helpful:

"I am sorry."

"I am here for you."

"I love you."

"It is okay to cry."

These are some of the words that can bring comfort to your loved ones or friends who are suffering the loss of their child.

Even more than words, your presence can bring comfort. Being available to listen, to give a hug and to sit quietly are ways you can be there through these unimaginable times.

Sometimes, in our desire to help, we find our minds racing to find words that we hope will take away the pain.

Well-meaning statements that can hurt

- “You can have another baby.”
Parents do not want another baby to replace their special little one who has died. They want this child and they need time and understanding to grieve.

Additionally, the hope of another pregnancy cannot be guaranteed.
- “At least you did not know him (or her).”
From the moment that this little one’s presence became known, the parent-child relationship began to form. Dreams of the future started to grow. In nine months, a joyous meeting was happily anticipated. Morning sickness may have let mom know that the baby was developing. Depending upon the timing of the loss, there may have been tiny flutters that grew into kicks and rolls. Indeed, mom and dad knew this precious baby.
- “You have an angel in heaven.”
This may not be within the parents’ belief system and can feel disturbing to them. For others, the thought of this may bring comfort. However, hearing this statement may cause pain because mom and dad desperately want their child in their empty arms now.
- “It is for the best.”
It is never best that a child dies. Even if a condition exists that was affecting their child’s health or would shorten his or her life, parents will never see their loss as being for the best.
- “It is time to get over this and move on with your life.”
After losing a child, a parent needs to be given space, time and permission to grieve. Grief is unique for each person and takes time. Avoid judging the parent or pressuring them to quickly move forward to their new normal.



Things that parents may find helpful

- Take them a meal.
Consider coordinating meals with other family and friends. There are tools online to help set up schedules and give ideas on the meals to prepare.
- Help with house and yard work.
- Run errands.
- Wash the car.
- Do laundry.
- Take the dog for a walk.
- If there are other children, those close to the family may offer to take the children for an outing, make a play date or take the kids to school.

Keep in mind that grieving people often do not have the energy to ask for help. Some things you can do without asking. Depending on the parents, you may want to offer your assistance in one of these ways.

Be as specific as possible. Instead of saying "If there is anything you need, please let me know," say, "I would love to do _____ for you and your family during this difficult time."

Your loved ones may or may not take you up on your offer, but you extended your support and that means a lot.

Grief Can Be Lonely

Many family and friends may think, "I do not want to intrude." "I am pretty sure other people are there supporting them." "I do not want to make them sadder by talking about their child." These thoughts can bring anxiety, especially as time passes. However, being present is so important after a loss.

Here are some simple and practical ideas to keep connected:

- Call or text, letting them know they are in your thoughts.
- Offer a short visit.

Be a shoulder to cry on. If tears come during your visit, know that you did not cause them.

When you are there, be present. Do not sit and look at your cell phone or work on your computer.

- When you call or visit, do not be afraid to talk about their child.

Bringing up the little one in conversation is usually welcomed as mother and father are frequently thinking of their child.

Say the child's name. The family wants and needs people who are open to hearing about their feelings of love and loss.

Ongoing Support

Remember that your support will be needed for the long term. Grieving takes time. Try not to disappear from your friends' or family members' lives.

Ways to be there as time passes:

- Throughout the year, send cards.

Acknowledge Mother's Day, Father's Day, their child's birthday and the anniversary of their child's death.

Keep in mind that holidays, birthday parties, baby showers and other events may be difficult for grieving parents to attend, especially within the first year of loss. This varies with each person, so be prepared to support whatever choices the parents make regarding attendance to these activities, without adding pressure or expectations upon them.





- Keep sending those caring texts:

"Thinking of you."

"I am here for you."

"I am praying for you."

- Make phone calls. Do not feel hurt if they do not answer or do not return your call. Just leave a message saying you are thinking of them and truly care.
- Use email or social media to reach out. You can do this day or night.

Remember, those who are grieving are not looking for words of wisdom. Just being there for them and validating their feelings can bring comfort.

Do not be afraid to say the same thing over and over.

Note: It may be really hard for them to be on social media. They are genuinely happy that their friends and family are enjoying life, but they are sad about their personal loss.

- Invite them to take a walk.

Consider choosing this as an alternative to shopping. It can be challenging to go into public. Seeing pregnant women and parents with children can be difficult.

- Send flowers.
- Deliver a candle and some bubble bath.
- Make gifts to charity in the name of the child.
- Pray for or with the family.
- In time, invite the parents out for dinner or a movie.

The parents may let you know that they need some space. Do not take this personally. Let them know that you are there to listen if they wish to communicate and share their experience.

Do not forget dad. Often attention is focused on the mother. In our society, dads are expected to be strong and protect mom. Even though men's and women's expression of grief can be different, fathers are grieving too. Recognize and acknowledge his loss.

It is never too early or too late to be there for the parents.

Understanding Grief

Grieving is part of living and part of the human condition. Grieving is not a sign of weakness or lack of faith.

Grief comes with many feelings:

- Shock
- Numbness
- Denial
- Sadness
- Anger
- Guilt
- Anxiety
- Depression

Allowing expression of these feelings, even though they may not seem rational or make sense, is very helpful to parents. Try to be patient and not take their expression personally.

Grieving takes time and it can have ups and downs. It is common for difficult feelings to come and go. A depressed state can feel like a setback, but it actually is a normal part of grieving.

Six months after loss can be an especially difficult time. At that point, you may feel like the parents should be returning to their usual selves. But in actuality, this is a time when the harsh reality of their loss really sinks in.

With time, there will be increased healing and a “new normal” will develop. Life will not be the same without their child, but it will begin to make sense again.

Gradually, the intensity of the pain will begin to decrease, but the journey through grief can last for years.

A parent should never be expected to forget the precious child they have lost.

Find a book or go online and learn more about grief. It will help you to walk this journey of loss with the parents in a healthy way.

Pregnancy and Infant Loss

Each month of October, walks are held across the country in honor of National Pregnancy and Infant Loss Awareness Month.

Consider attending Loma Linda University Children’s Hospital, “A Walk to Remember” with these parents whom you love and cherish.

References

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HOPES and Butterfly Program website:
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