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What friends and family can do

When a friend, a relative, or a colleague at work loses someone close to them, you will want to help them come to terms with what has happened. A sensitive approach will guide you in saying and doing the right thing, says experienced counsellor Julia Samuel.

Often people's greatest fear when someone is bereaved is not knowing what to say. Saying *'I am sorry'*, saying it in a way that is true to you, can be enough. Say it as soon as possible: the longer you take, the harder it is to say and the less genuine it will sound.

Try asking people what they want

Our inclination is to say something to try to make it better. When someone has died you cannot make it better: only a resurrection would do that. What you can do is be sensitive to the bereaved person's needs. How they respond to your initial *'I am sorry'* is likely to give you a clear indication of those needs. A quick thank you and a change of subject lets you know they do not want to talk at that point; a more open response may indicate that they do. A cardinal rule is - when you do not know, ASK.

Avoiding the person who is bereaved by crossing the street or looking past them is both hurtful and insulting. Acknowledge them, say: *'Hello, how are you, I am sorry'*. Even telling them, *'I don't know what to say'* is far better than hiding round corners.

If you ask after someone's family and discover that one of them has died, you may well be embarrassed, covered in confusion and guilty at asking such an awful question. Remember that the bereaved person lives with their pain 24 hours a day. Your own confusion only adds to the emotions with which they have to deal. The more honest, open and straightforwardly sympathetic you can be, the easier it is for the bereaved person to manage.

Bereaved people can be difficult to be with

Bereaved people often feel raw, bad-tempered and anxious. They can be very difficult to be with. You may feel that whatever you do or say is wrong or not enough. Be patient. Show you care in a way that works for you. You could give practical help by preparing a meal or tidying the house. You could help emotionally: offering yourself, your time, by listening, giving a hug or sending a card. Even shouting, *'You are impossible, I don't know what to say or do'* is usually better than withdrawing in a huff and leaving the person to 'get better' on his/her own. Be available without being intrusive - to listen or just to sit or walk. You can feel impotent about helping someone who is suffering a great loss; physically being with that person, listening, hearing how much they hurt, is probably the most helpful thing you can do.

Setting expectations

Do what you can to get explicit information from the bereaved person about what they want, how you can support them. Ideally let them set their expectations of what they can do; do not impose them. Spending time with someone who is grieving often puts us in touch with our own losses, so it is important we find ways of supporting ourselves too.

You may believe the bereaved person is being extremely brave. It is not usually helpful to tell them this. On the whole they do not feel brave. Often they feel they are barely surviving, that even getting up each day and breathing in and out is too much, but they have no option but to get on with living.

When three months have passed

The time following the first three months is often when the reality and the subsequent pain begin to kick in, and others are less likely to acknowledge the loss. It can be helpful to stay in touch through regular telephone calls, and again, ask what you can do to help.

If you meet a bereaved person quite a few months after the death, do not assume that mentioning what has happened will remind them painfully of something they would rather forget. Most people live with the image of the person who has died at the forefront of their mind every minute of the day. Your acknowledgement of that fact can be comforting, especially if they feel life has moved on for everyone else and their loss is forgotten. As usual there are exceptions. Some people absolutely do not want to talk about the person who has died. Respect that too and do not assume they are not hurting, just because they are not showing it.

Visiting the grave

If you visit the grave of the person who has died or do something yourself to remember them let the bereaved person or family know, they will greatly appreciate it. It is never too late to write a letter of condolence. I have often heard how much a letter received months and months after the death has been greatly appreciated. People are so thankful to be remembered when they think everyone has forgotten. If they do not like the letter, nothing is lost; they can always throw it away.

Remember anniversaries

Anniversaries are very important. - both the date of the death and other significant days, such as birthdays and Christmas. It is kind to acknowledge those days by a card, a call or flowers.