



Hospice

and Palliative Care of Greensboro

Beyond the Casserole

How to Truly Support Grieving Persons

Lunch & Learn at the Lusk Center

A free workshop series to help you navigate complex care and health issues

The Challenge

When someone has suffered the loss of a deeply-loved one...

- Many of us **want** to give meaningful support and ease the pain.
- Far fewer of us **actually give** meaningful support.
- Sometimes we accidentally **add** to the heartache.

Why is it so hard?

Death is scary. It reminds us of our own mortality. It reminds us of our vulnerability. It makes us feel helpless.

Pitfalls: We ‘explain’ the death with platitudes or easy answers.

Grieving people make us uncomfortable. In the face of intense emotions and devastation, we don’t know what to say. We don’t want to make it worse. We don’t want to make them cry. We want to make it better.

Pitfalls: We try to fix it. Give advice. Talk about silver linings.

Our culture does not tolerate grief very well. We have false expectations about the grief process.

We expect grief to have a clear beginning and end, and that people work their way through grief in a predictable and orderly fashion.

We expect that people will not let their grief “show” too much or for too long. We use words like closure and moving on.

Pitfalls: When grievers don’t meet these expectations, we sometimes pass judgment, and blame – or avoid - the griever.

The most effective grief support comes when we can set aside our expectation that we can bring order to an often-tumultuous experience.

It comes when we realize that we can’t stop the pain and make it all better.

It requires that we understand the experience of deeply grieving persons.

If we avoid the usual pitfalls, we discover that:

It’s not *easy* to support a grieving person...but it is *simple*~

**simple words, gestures and presence
that are heartfelt, humble, uncomplicated and loving.**

Simple Words

In the aftermath of a deeply distressing loss, there is no satisfactory answer to the question “why?” There is no way to ‘fix it’ for grieving persons.

If and when answers do come, they will come from the grieving persons themselves.

Avoid platitudes, easy fixes

*He’s in a better place now.
God needed her in Heaven.
Everything happens for a reason.
God only gives us what we can bear.
Time heals all wounds.*

Avoid offering ‘silver linings’

*At least he didn’t suffer.
At least you got to say goodbye.
It could be a lot worse...
At least you have other children.
You’ll find someone else.*

While we may be trying to ease their suffering or offer hope, we may do just the opposite – we minimize their pain, and we disregard the depth and gravity of the loss.

Offer a simple message of caring and support.

“I’m so sorry for your loss of John. My heart aches for you. I love you. I’m here. I know I can’t fix this, but I want to support you. Please know that I am holding you in my thoughts and my prayers (if they are religious).”

Listen. Support their own efforts to find meaning and answers.

“How is this for you? How do you understand it? What is helping you right now? Is there anything or anybody that has given you hope?”

Listen some more. Stop talking. Listen.

If you are talking as much as the griever...or more, then stop and listen. This is their time of need – their world has been turned upside down. It is their job to sort through the losses and changes, and to put the pieces of their life back together as they see fit.

Listen. Their output is more valuable than your input.

Don’t say “I know just how you feel.” You don’t.

Don’t rush in to tell your own story of grief. There is an important time and place to share your own experience. ‘Fellow travelers’ in grief – those who have had similar losses – are invaluable. But wait. Sit back. Allow the bleeding to stop. There will be time.

Simple Words

In grief, one's thoughts and feelings can get much more intense. Anger can move to a seething rage. Sadness and loneliness can sink to despair. Acts of kindness can fill one with deep sense of gratitude.

As we try to come to terms with a major loss, we feel what we feel. We think what we think. Our emotions and thoughts don't necessarily pass the logic test. They don't have to. Expressing these strong emotions and thoughts can go a long way in helping people come to terms with their loss.

Don't tell grievors how they should feel. Or what they should do.

You don't mean that.

You must be so relieved.

You should be glad that...

Don't cry.

You need to stay busy.

You need to go see a counselor

You need to move on.

"I do not like to hear people try to diminish my experience (as some of my church members did) by saying, 'This should NOT be the saddest time in your life; your mother lived a good, long life.' Yes, I know that she is better off, and heaven is much sweeter now, but that does not help my breaking, lonely heart..."

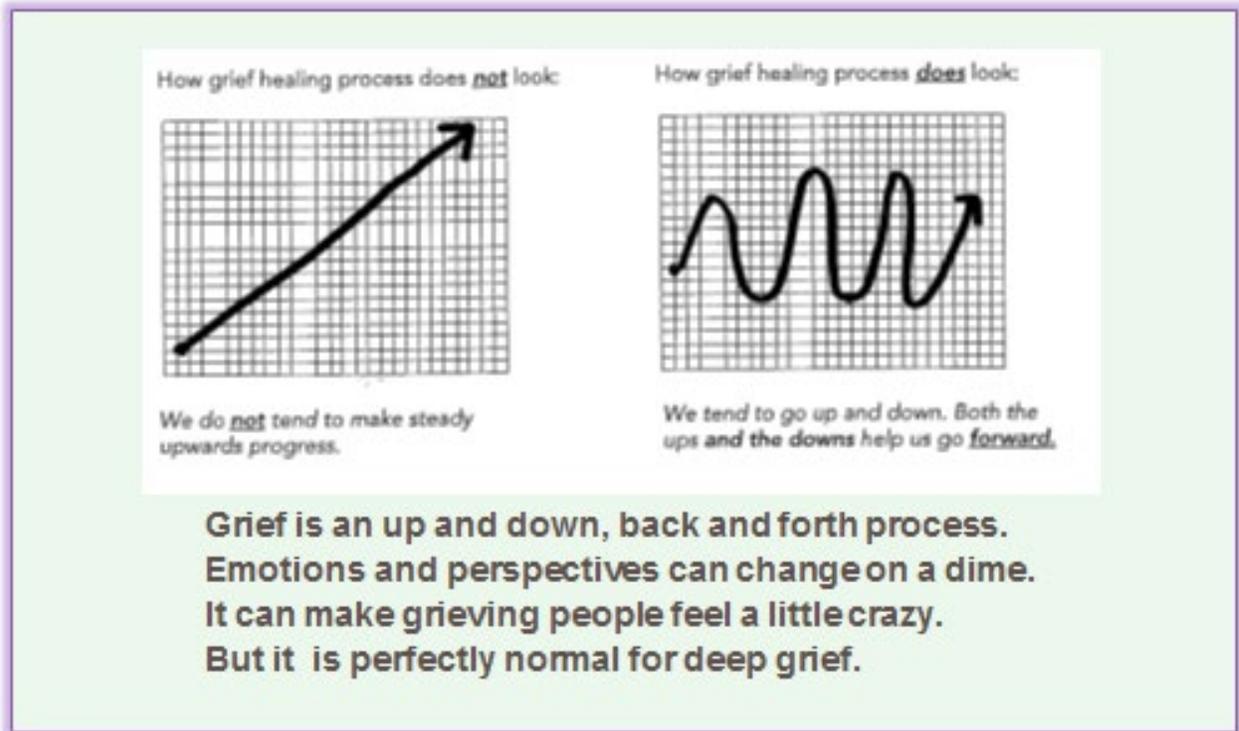
- HPCG grief support group participant

Yes, the raw expressions of grief can be difficult to hear. It can be tempting to want to change the subject, interrupt, or find a way to deny that it's really "that bad." We would often much prefer to try to cheer them up or set them straight.

But...if you can listen in a caring, nonjudgmental way, you are offering a simple but powerful gift to grieving persons. You can help them sort through the impossible jumble of emotions and thoughts that consumes them in grief. You can make them feel less alone. You can affirm them (and their sanity and competence and lovability) at a time when they need it most.

DO invite grievors to tell you how they feel. Accept their thoughts and feelings as valid and important pieces of a complex puzzle that they are trying to put together.

Simple Words



DO recognize and acknowledge the ups and downs.

Understand that “normal” griever might have a good cry and a good laugh in the span of an hour. Encourage them to accept these ups and downs as a part of healing.

Ask how he or she is doing today – or right now (recognizing that the answer to that question changes quickly).

Then ask again...’No, really – how are you doing?’ (since most griever know that “how are you?” is not a sincere invitation to talk truthfully).

Then simply try to accept their expression without evaluating it. Try not to measure their progress by noting when they seem positive or energetic. It’s easy to find ourselves saying,

“It’s so great to see you smiling again. I’m glad you’re doing better.”

A simple and sincere statement like that can tell the grieving person that you don’t truly understand how intermingled the tearful and happy moments can be, and how necessary it is to experience both the highs and the lows. A comment like this can also sometimes activate a griever’s sense of guilt (“how can I be *smiling* when my loved one is dead?”).

Simple Words

Some grieving people say that they can't tolerate talking about, or looking at old photos of, their deceased loved one.

Others say that they love to reminisce about the deceased and laugh or cry over photos. They want others to say their loved one's name.

What's a grief supporter to do?

We can ask if they would like to talk about their loved one.

We can invite them to share stories, and we can offer to share our own memories about their loved ones. We can laugh and cry with them.

What's important is that we are willing to take their lead and honor their way of healing.

We can help memorialize.

We can contribute to, or offer to help create, a photo book, a collection of stories and memories, a planted tree, a donation to a favorite charity, a memory quilt, etc.

What's important is that we recognize the fact that their loved one, although dead, still lives on in the grieving person. We honor them by honoring their loved one.

I love when friends or family bring up a lovely situation or something special my mother did...things that impressed them. I don't want to be the only one thinking how exceptional, smart, funny and beautiful she was! It helps to hear others voice how much they miss her as well.

- HPCG grief client

Simple Presence

Deep grief is one of life's most difficult and lonely journeys. The world can seem like a much darker and less predictable place. Grieving persons can feel very unlike their 'old' selves – overwhelmed, emotionally fragile, uncertain, vulnerable, less capable and less confident.

More than ever, they need the understanding and support of close friends and loved ones.

DON'T avoid the griever. DO acknowledge the loss.

As soon as you hear of a friend's loss...**respond**. Think about what this person and family might need. Determine what level of contact is appropriate to your relationship to them...and then call, text, send a card, or hurry over to the house.

Your words don't have to be profound. Your actions don't have to be grand. Your casserole doesn't need to be delicious. Just reach out. **Show up**.

“A quick Public Service Announcement for the general public:

Any condolences are better than no condolences.

After my mom died, I got a weird scrap of paper left on my doormat that included – along with the condolences – the phrase “no wonder you've looked so terrible lately.” And guess what? I appreciated it!”

- Meg Tansey

<http://modernloss.com/what-people-dont-do-after-friends-loss/>

A common saying among those who are grieving: “***Friends become strangers and strangers become friends.***” Often, grieving persons are shocked and disappointed when long-time friends fade away in the face of their tragedy. **And they do notice...**

“To the friends and family that found the entire death and dealing with my sadness all too hard, and held secret events behind our backs, and stopped inviting us to things we had always been included in, and slowly ended our relationship, thinking I didn't notice: I did notice.”

- Samantha Hayward

www.mamamia.com.au

Simple Presence

For some people and some losses, deep grief can consume them for a very long time. As the casserole-givers return to their daily lives, the griever returns to his or her changed life. That's often when some of the deepest grief occurs. That's when grieving people need a lot of support. Just as others start to forget about the loss, the griever is grappling with new challenges, lonely times of the day or week, holidays and anniversaries without their loved one, etc.

"Grief lasts longer than sympathy, which is one of the tragedies of the grieving"

- Elizabeth McCracken

Stay the course. Keep showing up.

Anticipate that your friend will likely enter even deeper and more difficult grief waters – and plan to remain present.

Mark your calendar to remember their anniversaries, significant dates, the holidays. These can be some of the toughest times, by far. A card, phone call, text, or visit to acknowledge these significant moments.

Widow Watching Widow

"Fine," I hear her say.
"I'm just fine."
And mourners hug her shoulders,
Pat her hand.
I stand near the coffee
and watch the gathering.
Her smile falters;
Her composure is complete,
A feat, I think, of fear and fatigue.
How can I warn her
That the numbness leaves
And agony becomes one's bedfellow
As anger roosts in the breast?
Now is not the best
Time for reality.

But when the friends and family
Have all gone away,
And her house is naked
In its emptiness,
Then, then I'll visit --
For tea, and trust, and truth-telling.

- Janet Muller Benway
March/April 2003



Simple Presence

When we honestly ask ourselves which person in our lives means the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a warm and tender hand. The friend who can be silent with us in a moment of despair or confusion, who can stay with us in an hour of grief and bereavement, who can tolerate not knowing, not curing, not healing and face with us the reality of our powerlessness, that is a friend who cares.

-Henri Nouwen

“Ah. I smiled. I'm not really here to keep you from freaking out. I'm here to be with you while you freak out or grieve or laugh or suffer or sing. It is a ministry of presence. It is showing up with a loving heart.”

— Kate Braestrup, *Here If You Need Me: A True Story*

The truest friends and "helpers" are those who wait for the griever to emerge from the darkness that swallowed them alive without growing afraid, anxious or impatient.

They don't pressure their friend to be the old familiar person they're used to; they're willing to accept that things are different and embrace the now-scarred one they love...., and are confident that their compassionate, non-demanding presence is the surest expression of God's mercy to their suffering friend.

They're ok with messy and slow and few answers ... and they never say, "Move on."

- Kay Warren

Simple Gestures

A loved one's death can blow a thousand holes in the fabric of a person's life. It impacts your body, mind, and spirit. It changes your daily routine. It changes your family and your social connections. It demands that you learn new skills and that you dig deeper to find strength. It can be exhausting and overwhelming.

"What they never tell you about grief is that missing someone is the simple part."

- Gail Caldwell, from
Let's take the Long Way Home

DO offer practical support

Here are some guidelines for providing *meaningful* support:

1. **You need to take the initiative.**

Grieving persons are often too overwhelmed to ask for support -- or to even know what they need. And it can be hard to accept help, or trust that the offer is sincere.

2. **Don't say "If there's anything I can do..." Offer specific, tangible action.**

First: think about this person's and family's circumstances. What roles did the deceased loved one fill – what things are now left undone? Look around: what needs doing? What do you know about this griever's likes and dislikes, strengths and vulnerabilities? What are their challenges? What relaxes them?

Second: think about yourself. What is your relationship to this person? What would be appropriate for that relationship? And what are your unique strengths, skills or talents? Are there things within your wheelhouse that might well meet a need for this griever? If you see a need that is not a good match for you, can you offer something else? Can you offer a gift card so that the griever can get what they need?

Third: Is the timing right? Are you rushing ahead in thinking about what the griever will need in the future? Would it be better to look at current need? Remember, the road of grief is long, and the griever can only attend to what is right before them.

Fourth: tell the griever that you would like to help by doing _____.
Get confirmation that this offer would be welcomed and useful.

Example: I am planning on feeding you and the kids next week –Monday, if that works for you. We would love for you and the kids to come to our house for dinner. But if that doesn't work for you, I can bring dinner by and drop it off.

3. If you say you will do something...then do it!

The 'grief world' is littered with promises not kept. Try not to add to the litter.

4. Be persistent with offers, but do not force your actions on them.

Grieving persons can often feel as if they have lost control of their lives. We don't want to inadvertently take away more control.

5. You don't need to 'go big.' Remember that the death of a loved one often leaves a grieving person with an almost insurmountable amount of changes and challenges. Just as we can't 'fix' their grief with easy answers, we can't fix it with grand gestures.

We can help the griever take on those little challenges and changes that they face every day along the way. Our small, simple gestures of support help to create a safe holding space for those who are grieving.

Simple Gestures

Help get obituary done Stay overnight Sit at the house
Make list of who brought casseroles and who belongs to what dish
Accompany to the funeral home Grocery shop Run errands
Help with thank you notes and acknowledgements Do laundry
Do yard work Do home repairs Answer the phone when they call
Show up if there is an emergency Invite to stay over at your house
Help sort through and pack up their loved one's belongings
Provide names of good handymen, auto mechanics etc. Clean up
Drive (kids to school, friend to doctor's appointments, etc.)
Invite to dinner Bring dinner Drop off dinner Take to Maxie B's
Invite for coffee or lunch or breakfast Bring fresh tomatoes by
Take their dog for a walk Clean out the cat litter box Take pet to vet
Take them to the Farmer's Market Invite them to take a walk with you
Encourage them to take *daily* walks with you Go bike riding with them
Take them for a massage or manicure Give a gift certificate to a spa
Take their kids to a movie or out for ice cream Baby-sit the kids
Take them for a country drive or an outing to the mall or a yard sale
Accompany them to religious services Go volunteer with them
'Celebrate' loved one's birthday with them Invite for the holidays
Help organize finances Help with taxes Organize medical bills
Research resources for them Make a donation in memory of deceased
Send a care package Help them get back into the swing of things at work
etc., etc.

“The spirit of what your friend needs to hear is simply this:

Hang in there. You are not alone, although this journey is deeply lonely. You are loved. You will not always feel this way. We honor the pain and memory and life-altering experience you are having. We are here to help you. We are not mind readers so we need to communicate if you need something. Nobody is judging you. We are heartbroken for you. No matter what, we will walk beside you.

And this lasagna keeps beautifully in the freezer.”

**-- Pamela Cytrynbaum, from her blog
Because I'm the Mom, May 10, 2013**

<https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/because-im-the-mom/201305/grief-etiquette-dont-say-anyone-grieving>





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Beyond the Casserole

How to truly support a grieving person

The Challenges

- We **want** to support those who are grieving.
- Many of us **fall short** of giving meaningful support.
- Sometimes we accidentally **add to the heartache.**



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The Challenges

- Death is scary.
- Grieving people upset us.
- Our culture doesn't have a good understanding of grief.



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Grief support is not easy... but it is simple

Meaningful grief support often comes
in the form of

- simple words
- simple presence
- simple gestures



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Simple Words

We need to trust that there are no easy fixes.

When we offer simple answers, we only diminish a grieving person's pain and show that we don't understand the depth and gravity of their loss.

If and when answers do come, they will come from the grieving persons themselves.



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Simple Words

“ I’m so sorry about John’s death. My heart aches for you. I’m here. I know I can’t fix it, but I am here to support you. I love you.”

Then...listen, listen, listen.

Listen to help them find their own answers.

If you are talking as much or more than the griever...STOP!

Don’t say “I know just how you feel.” (you don’t)

**Don’t rush in to tell the griever your own story of loss.
There will be time for that later.**



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Simple Words

Honor their unique grief experience.

**Don't tell them how to feel. Or how to think.
Or what they should do.**

DO invite grieverers to tell you how they feel.

**Accept their thoughts and feelings as valid and important
pieces of a complex puzzle that they are trying to put together.**



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Simple Words

“I do not like to hear people try to diminish my experience (as some of my church members did) by saying, ‘This should NOT be the saddest time in your life; your mother lived a good, long life.’

Yes, I know that she is better off and heaven is much sweeter now, but that does not help my breaking, lonely heart.”

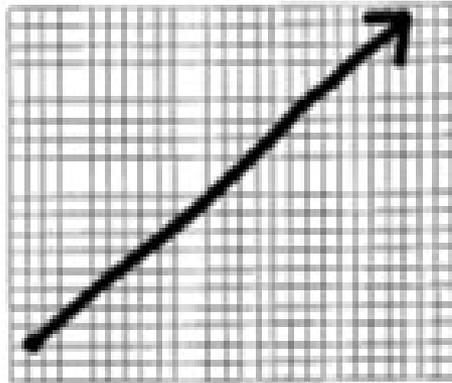


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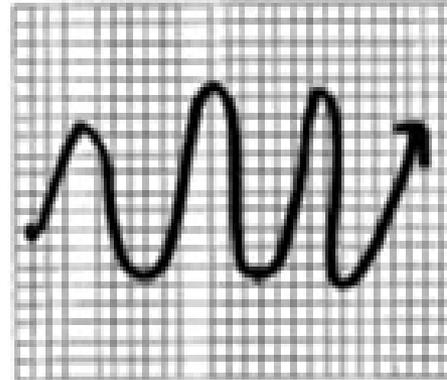
- HPCG grief client

How grief healing process does not look:



We do not tend to make steady upwards progress.

How grief healing process does look:



We tend to go up and down. Both the ups and the downs help us go forward.

**Grief is an up and down, back and forth process.
Emotions and perspectives can change on a dime.
It can make grieving people feel a little crazy.
But it is perfectly normal for deep grief.**



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Simple Words

Honor the natural rhythms of grief.

Ask: “How are you *today* or *right now*?”

Then ask: No, *really* – How are you today?

Be prepared to laugh with them or cry with them.

Try not to measure their progress...

“*You’re smiling! I’m so glad you’re doing better.*”



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Simple Words

Say their name

Many grieving people want to talk about their loved one. Others find it too painful.

So....Ask.

Invite them to share stories. Share your own stories of their loved one. Help them create memorials.



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Simple Words

“I love when friends or family bring up a lovely situation or something special my mother did...things that impressed them.

I don't want to be the only one thinking how exceptional, smart, funny and beautiful she was! It helps to hear others voice how much they miss her as well.”

- HPCG grief client



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Simple Presence

In times of deep grief, people need friends and family more than ever

Show up. Soon. Acknowledge this loss in whatever way is appropriate for the relationship – by card, text, call, or ringing the doorbell.

Don't avoid. Avoidance is the loudest message of all.



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Simple Presence

**“Grief lasts longer than sympathy,
which is one of the tragedies of the grieving.”**

- 1. Some of the most painful times happen long after the casseroles have been eaten.**
- 2. Keep showing up.** Ask how they are doing. Check in. Invite. Help.
- 3. Mark your calendar...** a few months out, 6-months, one year, birthday, first holidays. Acknowledge. Check in.



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Simple Presence

- open ears
- open heart
- acceptance
- silence
- caring touch
- understanding
- confidence
- trust
- faithfulness
- love



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Simple Gestures

“What they never tell you about grief is that missing someone is the simple part.”

- **Every aspect of every day changes in some way.**
- **Simple gestures are practical acts that help share and carry the load. They give hope.**
- **They are acts that honor and acknowledge the grieving persons and their deceased loved one.**



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Simple Gestures

- **Take the initiative.**
- **Offer tangible support.**
- **Consider this person, the loss, the need.**
- **Consider your relationship. Consider the timing.**
- **If you offer it...DO IT.**
- **Be persistent. But don't force.**



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“The spirit of what your friend needs to hear is simply this:

Hang in there. You are not alone, although this journey is deeply lonely. You are loved. You will not always feel this way. We honor the pain and memory and life-altering experience you are having. We are here to help you. We are not mind readers so we need to communicate if you need something. Nobody is judging you. We are heartbroken for you. No matter what, we will walk beside you.

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-- Pamela Cytrynbaum, from her blog
Because I'm the Mom, May 10, 2013



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