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Pushing Through the Unimaginable

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In the second act of the hit musical, “Hamilton,” a character sings, “There are moments that the words don’t reach. There is suffering too terrible to name. You hold your child as tight as you can and push away the unimaginable. The moments when you’re in so deep, it feels easier to just swim down.”

These words begin to describe the agony I felt about two years ago when my serious boyfriend passed away suddenly. I was completely and utterly devastated. For months, I was living in the kind of hell I had only heard about before, and I struggled to want to stay alive. I spent countless hours crying, lost my appetite completely, and felt completely disoriented. Additionally, for several months, I experienced recurring Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) flashbacks to seeing his body the morning we discovered him. This season would prove to be the darkest part of my life thus far.

Since then, I have read and learned about loss, felt the grief from my own loss deeply, and talked with those who have intimately experienced loss and those who have yet to lose a loved one. Grief is a sort of enigma, because although almost everyone will at some point experience it in their lifetime, it is rarely discussed by society. Society is silent partially because individuals are unaware of what to say or do for someone who is suffering from grief.
As a result, in the midst of the grieving process, feeling understood is a rarity. People who have never lived through the aftermath of an unexpected passing are often perplexed as to what to do or say to someone who is potentially traumatized with the effects of acute sorrow.”

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Because social support is one of the most essential means of alleviation from intense grief and grief-related depression, friends and family of grieving individuals must step up and know what to say and do to help those they love experiencing grief. Here are four ways to connect in a more helpful and thoughtful way with those experiencing heart-wrenching grief:

1. Make Your Presence Known.

You can make your presence known in a variety of ways depending on what you know about the needs of the grieving person. You might do something as simple as checking in with them via text message every day to something more tangible, such as bringing them food. Although dropping off something like flowers is nice, often what is even more valuable is being genuinely mindful of your loved one’s life and contributing something of real need. If the grieving person has children, offer to babysit them for a few hours every week, or if they are childless, you could run errands for them or even just wash their dishes. This kind of service may not come close to fixing the problem, but you certainly will be helping take some of the burden off their shoulders.

2. Grief Has No Rules

No one’s grieving process is the same, even if they are grieving the same loss. Refrain from putting expectations on someone’s healing—it’s anyone’s guess how they will feel from moment to moment or how their perspective will shift from day-to-day. Researchers identify that sometimes, due to the nature of death...
and the value society places on that loss, the griever may be denied the right to grieve, may be denied the social support essential to their overcoming their loss, and may be deprived of the social validation needed to heal. Shy away from “disenfranchising” someone’s grief and avoid setting rules for them so that they can navigate their sometimes-agonizing grief in a way that feels right for them.

3. Listen

Feeling truly understood is uncommon for those who are actively grieving. No one expects you to perfectly empathize with your grieving loved one—that is impossible. Instead, give them your sincere attention in order to hear what they are trying to communicate, which research suggests can help. Simply listening will allow you to better comprehend the depth of their sorrow and the gravity of this experience for them. You are not listening in order to solve every problem or answer every question; you are listening in order to better understand and support them. Not every comment even needs a response; it may just need an active, listening ear.

4. Show Up for the Long Haul

Showing up for the long haul is not an invitation to smother your grieving loved one—rather this is a gentle reminder that the grieving process can be long and arduous. Grieving is not like a marathon or a triathlon that you have trained for over several months; it’s more like hiking the Pacific Crest Trail with hardly any preparation at all (à la Reese Witherspoon in Wild). Many people will promptly reach out after a loss, only to never follow up again. When someone’s world has been completely turned upside down by death, they need people to remind them that life can still be reliable and consistent in other ways. We can even be proof of
reliability and consistency in our loved one’s life in the way we show our love and care for them.

**Impacting their Grieving Journey**

To say that death is difficult would be an understatement. Death can touch and devastate every aspect of life. No matter who you take this grieving journey with, it will be challenging. The good news is that if you are searching for articles like this one, chances are you are already on the right track to helping your loved one heal. Help your loved one as they push through this unimaginable circumstance by making your presence known, not setting rules about grief, listening, and showing up for the long haul.

**Endnotes**


