

Friend Helping Friends

What you can do for a bereaved friend.

When death touches the family of someone we love, we often ask the question, "Is there anything I can do?" We mean it sincerely, but sometimes we simply don't know what to do, and the person we want to help may be hesitant to ask for anything specific – or may simply not be able to identify the help they need.

Practical "Helps"

Remember, people often find it difficult to ask for help. It is vitally important to volunteer. Following are a number of suggestions. Choose only the tasks you know you can do or that are appropriate to your relationship.

During the first few days or at funeral time...

- Be a house sitter when the family is away from the home making funeral arrangements, attending the visitation or attending the funeral or memorial service.
- If the death occurs out-of-town and your friend is leaving for the funeral, pick up their mail and newspaper, water plants and watch the house.
- Arrange for the care of their pets.
- Answer the telephone. Make a list of names, addresses and telephone numbers of people who call, stop at the house or offer to help. Take accurate messages and give brief, correct information.
- Telephone relatives and friends, notify them of the death and the funeral arrangements.
- Clean the house and/or yard in preparation for people coming for the funeral.
- If needed, do the laundry.

- Keep a written record of food brought to the house including names, addresses, telephone numbers, the type of food they brought and a description of the container.
- Return food dishes and pans following the funeral.
- Wash and clean your friend's car.
- Arrange housing for out-of-town guests.
- Coordinate or help prepare a get-together meal for family and friends prior to or following the funeral.
- Offer to make an enlarged color photocopy of a special picture for a photo display at the service.
- Help write or address thank-you notes to people who sent flowers or food or made memorial contributions.
- Write a description of the flowers on the backs of flower cards.
- Help receive friends during the visitation by being at the register.
- Run errands such as grocery shopping, going to the cleaners, picking up people at the airport, etc.
- Offer transportation for family or friends going to the cemetery.
- If the death occurred in a nursing home, pick up the deceased person's belongings.
- If the deceased had any rented medical equipment at home, arrange for its return.
- Transport school-age children or offer to keep young children.
- Check the calendar of the deceased and/or your friend, and call to cancel or change appointments.
- Clip the obituary notice from the newspaper. Send it to family members.

As the weeks go by...

- Do what you can to be sure your friend eats regularly.
- Organize a support network for food, a “night out” or visiting over the coming months.
- Suggest that your friend fix a salad for dinner while you bring a “fun” video and pizza. If they turn you down, try again soon. Be persistent.
- Give some especially good photos to the family with a note telling the story of the picture. Write the date and names on the back.
- Help decorate the house “just a bit” for the holidays.

Emotional “Helps”

While many of our “practical” suggestions may help your friend emotionally, you may often wish you knew what to say to help. Just what DO we say and what can we do to REALLY help?

During the first few days or at funeral time...

- We can say, “I’m sorry” or “I’m here for you”.
- Appropriate hugging or holding is also important. Like the child who skins a knee, the adult who emotionally hurts often needs a hug.
- Refer to the deceased by name.
- Give your friend the chance to share feelings about the deceased and the death. One helpful, simple question is “What happened?”. This allows your friend the opportunity to talk about the person and the death according to their own needs. Doing this helps them to accept the reality of the death by replaying the experience in their mind.
- Never be afraid that if you talk too much about the person who died, you are going to create more pain. Chances are your friend is already thinking about the person. They will probably

welcome the chance to talk with someone who seems interested. Helpful questions are, “How are you feeling?” or “How is your day going?”. Be prepared to listen. Remember that some people like to talk about their feelings, while others don’t. Be sensitive to what they need, not what you think they need.

- Visit and call your friend following the funeral. The most difficult time for people is often when everyone goes home after the funeral and they are alone.
- Often, the really lonely and painful days occur between three and seven months following the death. Everyone else has gone on with their lives. Staying in touch regularly can be a life saver!
- In some instances, you might want to consider talking with a qualified person about your friend. Leavitt Funeral Services uses the service of Priscilla F. Leavitt, Ph.D., a psychologist whose doctoral dissertation was in grief adjustment. This is a free service provided by the funeral home and by Dr. Leavitt and her colleagues at The Counseling and Wellness Center (304-422-7300).
- You may want to give your friend a special poem, reading or scripture verse that you have personally found helpful.

As the weeks go by...

- Invite your friend to attend (and go with them to) the Leavitt annual memorial service held Memorial Day weekend or the “Getting Through the Holidays” seminar held before Thanksgiving.
- Volunteer, if appropriate, to help dispose of the deceased’s belongings when they are ready. This is often an emotionally difficult time.
- Offer to go with your friend if they are responsible for going to the offices of Social Security, an attorney or accountant, the court house, etc. It’s important that they don’t feel alone in doing these unfamiliar tasks. It is also a good time to talk.
- Mark the deceased’s birthday, wedding and death anniversary dates on your calendar and send a memorial donation, flowers or a card in subsequent years to family members.

- Write your favorite memories of the deceased to give to the family. This is good for you and a precious gift for them.
- Take your friend a book on grief.
- Stop by any time with a holiday wreath, an arrangement or a bunch of homegrown flowers.

These ideas are certainly not all of the possible ways you can help. You can probably think of many more. One of the most important keys to being helpful is being willing to take the time to be there and to listen. Remember that we cannot take away someone's hurt. We can only share that hurt and thereby give them hope – the hope that someone else cares – the hope that life can be meaningful – and the hope that they will feel better in time.