



Helping Others After Tragedy Strikes: What to Say and Do

1. Don't feel that you must have "something to say."

- | Your presence is enough. Especially with fresh grief, your embrace, your touch, and your sincere sorrow are all your friend or colleague may need. Be sure to reach out, no matter how much time has passed since the tragedy. Your friend will still appreciate knowing you care.

2. Take the initiative.

- | Don't merely say, "If there's anything I can do, give me a call." Make suggestions and specific offers of help. For example, you might say, "I'd like to mow your lawn next Saturday morning at ten. Would that be okay with you?" or "May I go grocery shopping with you or for you?" or "May I help with addressing thank you notes or addressing bills?" Each thoughtful gesture gives something of yourself and keeps the survivor from having to continually reach out for assistance. You are also communicating to your friend that you think he or she is important. Our self-esteem is often low during the early months after a tragedy. Knowing someone cares enough to help does wonders for our morale.

3. Help with everyday concerns.

- | You might run errands, answer the phone, prepare meals, sit with an elderly parent or do the laundry. These seemingly minor tasks may loom large for an individual facing loss as misery drastically depletes physical energy. An offer to spend the evening just watching television together can be comforting.

4. Help with the children

- | If children are involved, send them special cards and invite them on outings with your family. Children should not be shielded from grief, but occasionally they need a break from the sadness at home, while their parents may welcome a day for grieving without them. Show your love and support and invite them to discuss their thoughts and feelings. They need good listeners, too. Don't assume that a child who seems calm is not in pain.

5. Listen.

- | A survivor of tragedy desperately needs a listener who is accepting and supportive and willing to listen patiently to repetitive stories. The need to "tell the story" decreases as healing progresses. And each time the story is told, the finality of the tragedy sinks in a little more. When feelings of anger, frustration, disappointment, fear, and sadness are expressed, accept those feelings. If the survivor keeps them bottled inside, the healing process may take longer. Sharing thoughts and feelings lessens the stress. The increased stress experienced during early grief can lead to health problems for some people. Help your friend stay healthy by listening.



6. Allow the survivor to grieve in his or her own way.

- | Don't push the mourner to "get over" the disaster. If he needs to rake the leaves or chop wood to release energy and tension, let him. If she wants to pore over old pictures and read every book on grief and suffering she can find, let her. We all suffer in our own way; avoid being judgmental.

7. Remember special days and times.

- | Double your efforts to be sensitive to your friend's needs during difficult times of the day or on days with special meaning, like holiday or an anniversary of the tragedy. Mark your calendar so you'll remember to reach out to the person on or before those special days.

8. Know that recovery takes time.

- | Don't expect the mourner to be over it within a few weeks. Great waves of emotion may sweep in for many months and then, slowly and gradually, the intensity subsides. It doesn't happen a day after the tragedy or even two months after it, as many people believe. Sometimes the real grieving is just beginning by then. It may be more than a year before you see the results of your caring and support – but when your friend smiles again and feels less pain, the reward is there. If the bereaved person doesn't seem to be recovering at all, despite your best efforts and the passage of time, suggest professional help to assist in learning new ways of coping. (Find out which professionals in your region are experienced in working with the bereaved. Don't assume that all counselors and clergy are trained in this area.)