LIVING WELL

How to Stay Close When Someone Is Grieving

You cannot remove someone's grief, but you can offer company, steadiness and a clear path towards more help when it is needed.

You do not need the perfect words

The message box is open. You have typed three versions, deleted them all and begun to wonder whether saying nothing might be safer. It probably feels as though there must be a correct sentence for a death. There is not. Your first job is not to explain the loss or make it bearable. It is to make contact.

Bereavement can involve anger, guilt, anxiety, sadness or despair. It can also bring numbness, confusion, helplessness or hopelessness. Sleep, appetite, mood and energy may change. Knowing that range matters because the person you care about may not look or sound the way you expected grief to look.

Start plainly: "I'm sorry. I'm thinking of you." If you knew the person who died, you can acknowledge them directly. If you do not know what to say, honesty is kinder than a polished speech: "I don't have the right words, but I'm here." Then leave room for whatever comes back, including no reply.

Try not to measure the response against your intention. A short answer does not mean your message failed, and silence does not turn your care into a mistake. You are opening a door, not demanding that someone walk through it on the day you chose.

Follow their grief, not your script

Grief is a normal response to loss, but it does not run on a universal timetable. How long bereavement lasts can depend on the closeness of the relationship, whether the death was expected and other factors. That makes patience more useful than assumptions about where someone "should" be by now.

One person may want to talk about the death. Another may want ordinary conversation, a familiar routine or quiet company. You can ask rather than guess: "Would you like to talk about them, or would you rather talk about something else?" The choice can stay with the grieving person.

Friends, family, trusted people and faith communities can all be sources of support. Your role is

not automatically to become the only source. You can be one part of a wider circle, especially if the person already has people, traditions or a community they want to lean on.

Keep cultural and faith traditions in the hands of the person who owns them. Honouring someone who died might include a celebration of life, a memory book or a tribute page, but these are possibilities rather than assignments. Ask whether remembrance feels welcome before turning it into a plan.

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Small structure can steady a hard day

Loss can alter appetite, sleep, mood and energy. A routine may offer some order and purpose by directing attention towards things that can still be controlled. That does not mean scheduling grief out of the day. It means recognising that ordinary structure and mourning can occupy the same life.

You might ask what kind of contact would feel manageable: a conversation with a trusted person, time with a faith community or help finding grief counselling. Keep the question specific enough to answer, but make refusal easy. Support stops feeling supportive when the grieving person has to protect your feelings by accepting it.

Do not turn every interaction into a progress report. Grief is not a task somebody completes to reassure the people around them. Talk can be comforting, but so can a familiar exchange that does not require the person to describe their emotional state once again.

Stay attentive after the first rush of condolences has passed. Because the length of bereavement varies, a calendar cannot tell you that support is no longer wanted. A later message can be as simple as the first one: an acknowledgement, an invitation to talk and no demand for an immediate answer.

Know where friendship reaches its edge

Some people find grief counselling or grief therapy helpful. Online grief counselling groups and bereavement groups are also options, but the research does not justify presenting a group as a reliable remedy for everyone. Support can be valuable without being guaranteed to change grief.

A 2022 systematic review of 14 randomised controlled trials involving 1,519 bereaved adults found that bereavement groups were only marginally more effective than control groups immediately afterwards, with no benefit detected at follow-up. The studies varied

considerably, which limits how broadly the result can be applied. The honest offer is "this may help," not "this will fix it."

Be especially alert when a death was violent, including death by homicide, suicide or accident. A 2020 review of 37 studies found that, among adults exposed to violent loss, prolonged grief disorder was strongly associated with other psychological disorders, suicidal thoughts or behaviour, and rumination. Most included studies were cross-sectional, so these associations do not prove what caused what.

Hopelessness, crisis or talk of suicide moves the situation beyond ordinary support. Encourage contact with a health care provider or counsellor. In the United States, someone who is struggling or in crisis can call or text the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline. If you believe there is immediate danger, treat it as an emergency rather than trying to carry it alone.

Monday takes one honest sentence

Your practical step is small: contact the person on Monday. This is one of the rare acts of care that needs no special object. It takes your attention, a few plain words and a willingness not to control the answer.

You could say: "I've been thinking about you. Would you like to talk, or would you prefer some ordinary company?" If you have already offered support once, say: "There's no need to reply now. I just wanted you to know I'm still here." Do not attach a deadline or ask them to comfort you in return.

If they want to remember the person who died, ask how. They may want to talk, follow a faith or cultural tradition, make a memory book or create a tribute page. If they do not want any of those things, let the invitation rest. Care is still care when it is declined.

Then remember what supporting someone after a death actually asks of you: not brilliance, certainty or a way to remove grief. It asks you to make contact, listen to the answer and remain willing to make contact again.

Where this comes from

- Bereavement

  MedlinePlus, U.S. National Library of Medicine · https://medlineplus.gov/bereavement.html
- Grief | How Right Now | Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

  Centers for Disease Control and Prevention · https://www.cdc.gov/howrightnow/emotion/grief/index.html



- A systematic review and meta-analysis of correlates of prolonged grief disorder in adults exposed to violent loss.

  European journal of psychotraumatology, 2020 · https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/30949303/
- Effects of bereavement groups-a systematic review and meta-analysis.

  Death studies, 2022 · https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/32501773/
- Chronic Pain and Grief.

  Revista Colombiana de psiquiatria, 2020 · https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/31426921/