

Helping Friends and Family in Times of Loss

Project Chai – Chai Lifeline

When tragedy strikes we are often faced with a difficult dilemma. How to help? Sometimes we are simply too afraid to say the wrong thing fearing that this will cause our friend or family member to burst into tears. Many of us move slowly away from the bereaved person, because being around him may be very uncomfortable or difficult for us.

How can we help someone who is grieving? Here are some “dos” and “don’ts” that can help you.

DO:

- **Be patient and non-judgmental**

Every individual deals with grief in his own way. Some feel a strong need to talk about it, while others prefer to be alone and keep busy in order to take their minds off of it. There is no right or wrong way to grieve. Everyone handles it in his or her own personal way. So, act in accordance with the wishes of the bereaved and do not pass judgment on them. The bereaved may need a good listener, though they may also feel the need for friends with whom they can joke around with to take their mind off the loss. Give the bereaved person as much time as he or she needs to mourn. Remember: you are there to help in whatever way is needed.

- **Make a list of things you can do to help**

Hand the list to the bereaved person. Grieving people will not always pluck up the nerve to ask for help even if it has been offered. Often they just can’t concentrate enough to think it through to know what they would want. So a list will help them to know what to ask for and confirm your serious intentions.

Examples of offers of help:

- * Rides to the doctor, to get groceries, or shopping. In the first few weeks it be very hard for them to concentrate and to drive
- * Help with shopping, cooking, housework, and miscellaneous errands. Even everyday tasks will be hard to undertake when they have to rebuild their whole lives. Help will speed up the recovery process.
- * Help looking after children. In the days following the event a person must look after himself and regain his strength. Looking after children in addition to this can be another very difficult task.
- * Invite them out for coffee, go together to the mall, to a lecture, or out for dinner. In the beginning you can expect your invitations to be turned down, but with time this can be a lifesaver for them and a great way to get out. Keep trying.

- **Listen**

During hard times like these being a good listener is the most welcome help you can give someone who is bereaved. Encourage them to talk about the incident, about their feelings for the deceased. Do not try

to offer wise advice or tell of your own similar experience. Just listen. Accept the range of feeling expressed, including anger and blame; refrain from passing judgment. Do not say what you think the other person should feel or what you think they should do. The grieving person needs to know you have provided a space where they can express themselves.

- **Encourage self-care**

Make sure the bereaved person eats enough nourishing food, maintains good hygiene and grooming, and gets adequate rest. While mourning, many people neglect their health and this can hamper the healing process.

- **Stay in touch in the weeks and months following the loss**

Many bereaved people raise this problem: A few months after the event, after the initial interest, people get back to their routines and forget about the loss. By contrast, the bereaved is still experiencing the grief in full force and death is as real at this stage as it was at the beginning. This occurs because the pace of life in the regular world does not match the pace of bereavement. In this situation the bereaved person feels out of sync with what is going on around him and gets left behind with his pain, while others stop showing interest and go on with their own lives, as if nothing happened. Inquire how the bereaved person is doing or just listen to them even after a few months when everyone else seems to have forgotten.

- **Remember to call on important days**

Birthdays, holidays, wedding anniversaries, and the anniversary of the death, are all difficult days for the bereaved, so let them know you are thinking of them. They will appreciate it very much.

- **Refer the bereaved to professional help when necessary**

Bereavement is a natural process and each and every person goes through it at their own pace. However, if you notice that even after several months they are not functioning in their day to day lives, neglecting their health, using drugs or alcohol, or that they are suffering far beyond what they can endure, suggest professional help. This is especially important under circumstances where the person has no one to talk to and share his distress with, or where the person expresses desolate thoughts.

- **Look for support**

If you feel the help you have extended is too difficult for you or if you need advice on how to handle the situation, look for support. Often, trying to help others can be a draining and confusing experience. If you begin to feel you need help and counseling, do not hesitate to ask for it from friends, relatives, or professionals.

DO NOT:

- **Do not do anything out of a feeling of obligation**

Many people say things like “Let me know if you need anything” so they can feel like they are doing something. In fact, in most cases the bereaved person will not feel comfortable about asking or will not remember who offered to help with what. It is better to offer something tangible in a specific area that you can do.

- **Avoid using insincere comfort**

Many bereaved people mention that sayings such as “This was G-d’s will” or “You’ll get over it with time.” or “Everything’s meant for the best.” cause much more harm than good. The bereaved often take no comfort from these sayings and essentially feel that you do not really understand their pain. Be especially careful of saying to parents “Well, you still have other children.”

- **Do not be afraid to mention the deceased’s name or talk about him**

Particularly in the first weeks and months following death but also later on, do not avoid the subject of loss or speaking of the deceased. In addition, do not pretend that you did not hear about the death and hope that the subject does not come up. The deceased was important and still is to their loved ones and they need to know that he or she has not been forgotten.

- **Do not remove paintings, pictures, or handicrafts of the deceased from your home**

Many bereaved people, especially parents, have said that when this happens they feel the deceased has died a second death. Do not assume that because it is painful for you to have these reminders it is painful for the bereaved person as well.

- **Do not suggest taking comfort in drugs or alcohol**

These are only temporary solutions that may in turn cause greater problems and even intensify the anguish. Drowning one’s sorrows in drink is neither a healthy nor helpful way of coping.

- **Do not be afraid of saying the wrong thing**

When the bereaved person suddenly bursts into tears, it does not mean you have hurt them or said the wrong thing. On the contrary it often means you have enabled them to cry in your presence and let out their feelings. Many bereaved people are grateful for that privilege.

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