



5 WAYS TO SUPPORT SOMEONE WHO IS GRIEVING

By Joel Feldman

My 21-year-old daughter, Casey, died in July 2009 after being struck by a distracted driver. Before her death, I found it difficult to feel comfortable speaking to those whose family members had died. I did not know what to say or do, and feared that I might say the “wrong thing.”

Following Casey’s death, I experienced a wide range of behaviors from family, friends and coworkers, some that were helpful and others that were harmful.

There is awkwardness, anxiety and ignorance that surrounds death and mourning that can interfere with attempts to comfort.

Recognizing that grief is different for everyone, I offer some suggestions for providing support based on my own experience.

Don’t judge a person’s grieving. I don’t really know how I will be on any given day and don’t appreciate someone else telling me how they think I am

doing. Tell me how well I am doing and I may think that I am doing too well and not grieving enough. Tell me that it's time to get on with my life and I will resent you. It is up to me, alone, as to how I grieve and for how long.

Say my child's name. I often heard that people were afraid to talk to me about Casey for fear that they would remind me of her and make me sad. I think of her all the time as do many who have lost loved ones. We fear that our loved ones will be forgotten. I consider it an incredible gift if someone says Casey's name, tells me a story about her or asks me to tell a story about her.

I welcome people "intruding" upon my grief. I did not feel that a single person who reached out to me was intruding. Yet many, who did not reach out initially, tried to explain later by saying they did not want to intrude. Surviving a loss is a struggle and I feel different

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What is the "right" thing to say? There really are no magic words that will lessen someone's grief. When we grieve, we often just need someone to sit with us and to listen if we wish to speak. Mental health professionals speak of "being present" or empathic listening, the ability to listen intently so that the other person knows you are paying attention and understand not only their words but how they are feeling and what it is like to see things through their eyes.

"I was thinking of you and your family" is the kind of sentiment that is helpful. I welcomed being asked what I was going through if done in a caring fashion.

On the other hand, please do not speak those platitudes that mean nothing and perhaps only comfort the one saying them. "Be strong," "time heals all



wounds" and "he or she is in a better place" are just not helpful.

When is it too late to send a card? For me, the answer is never. There is a lot of support in the weeks following a death, but gradually, that support dissipates. Grief can worsen once support is taken away.

The second year following Casey's death has been harder in some ways than the first. Don't forget the anniversary of the death. Yes, it is appropriate and incredibly helpful for family members on that painful anniversary to know that others care. A simple card, text or email will be greatly appreciated.

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