

Supporting someone who's lost a partner

When a friend, relative or colleague loses a loved one, it can be hard to know what to say or how to act.

We're often unsure if we should talk about it, or something else, if they want to see us, or if they want to spend time on their own. We may feel the need to 'make things better' or fear saying the wrong thing.

Our own uncertainties can be further compounded if we were close to the person who died; and have our own feelings of grief. However, the support of friends and relatives is crucial in helping someone grieve the loss of their other half. And while many of us will rally round when someone dies, it's worth remembering that a partner's onset of dementia (or other long-term health diagnosis), or move into a care home, can cause similar feelings of loss, distress and grief.

We all grieve differently

Grief is a complex emotion and stirs up different feelings for everyone involved. There is no set timescale for what is felt, how or when.

At first, thoughts and feelings can be chaotic and overwhelming. People might find it difficult to explain them, or they may not want to for fear of making them seem 'too real'. Some people feel the need to be 'strong' and hold their emotions back. This might make them seem quiet or withdrawn. This doesn't mean that they don't need you, they might just need some space or to talk about something else.

Other common feelings include shock, anxiety, anger, irritation, guilt and intense sadness. This might make people want to isolate themselves. They could also come across as bitter, irritable or they may try to push you away. This is all a normal part of the grieving process. Never tell them how they should be feeling, and at what stage – grief is an extremely personal experience, and everyone differs.



It's good to talk (or text, or email, or...)

If you find it hard to talk to your friend or relative face-to-face, or they don't feel up to having you round, write them a text, email or letter to simply let them know you're there for them. Contact matters at this time.

Stay away from tired clichés such as 'time is a healer,' or from pressuring them to go out. Just letting them know you're thinking of them will be a great comfort, as will sharing happy memories about the person who has passed on.

Some people shut themselves off from family and friends during their grief. While this is a normal part of the grieving process, over time they can become lonely and isolated.

Dropping them a regular call or note will let them know you're still there for when they feel the time is right to start socialising again. Even if you hear nothing back, continue to stay in contact so they can reconnect when they are ready to do so.

After my husband died I said I was never going to leave the house again. I lost all my confidence. Loneliness is a terrible thing, it can eat away at you. *Oddfellows member*



How to talk, and listen

Many of us worry about saying the wrong thing to a person who is grieving, and this can be one of the main reasons people become isolated after the loss of a loved one. However, the most important thing when someone dies is: listening.

We might feel awkward if their loved one's name comes up in conversation, but it's important to let a bereaved person talk about their loss. Our culture doesn't deal with death well, but let them know they can talk, and even cry, with you if they need to. When someone is suffering a loss, they may talk about experiences and memories in minute detail, repeating things again and again. This will be comforting to them and is a needed part of the grieving process. Listen and let them talk, never tell them you've already heard it.

Offer practical help

Learning to live alone can be hard, especially if their other half took responsibility for things like expenses and bills. They may be feeling overwhelmed, sad, depressed, unconfident, or it might be a matter of pride. They may not want to ask for help or feel ashamed that they don't know how to do certain things.

An offer of general help may go unheeded as they might not know what they need or might not want to put you out. Grieving people can feel like they're in a 'fog' and may not be proactive. So, why not try being more direct? If you're going shopping, ask them if there's anything they need.

Try to be consistent and genuine in your offers and provide support for the long run. They will need your support for months or even years afterwards. Offer extra support on birthdays, anniversaries and at holiday times. Call them, sit with them, invite them round or take them out.

Information about the Oddfellows, as well as further useful advice for those who have lost a partner, can be found at www.oddfellows.co.uk/firststeps

When I moved house my friends helped me. On my birthday last week they made a cake and sang happy birthday to me. It's these small things that really help. *Oddfellows member*

Be their friend

When people lose their other half they often struggle to socialise – not just straight away, but maybe even months and years afterwards. It's all too easy for people to drift away from their friends and become isolated.

There are many reasons for this – pain, hurt, depression, lack of confidence, feeling like a spare part, not having any confidence on their own, or maybe their loved one did all the driving and they're stuck at home? Aim to make regular plans, on their terms, even if it's just a coffee or a walk. When someone is grieving, long social events or large gatherings may be too much for them to face. Ask them what they would like to do, what feels comfortable to them, and listen to what they say.

If it feels right to do so, why not offer to take them with you to any groups, exercise classes or clubs you attend? Or if you know they have a certain hobby or skill, why not find something you can go to together? Often people who have lost a partner will have lost their confidence; after a long time of doing stuff as a pair, they now have to do that alone. Having a friend to go with them, even just for the first few sessions, will make them much more confident.

Helping them to cope

Over time, if someone you know is really struggling with their grief and it's affecting their day-to-day life, get them to speak to their GP. Offer to go with them and support them, but don't push them.

They could also contact bereavement support organisations directly, such as **Cruse Bereavement Care** (www.cruse.org.uk, 0808 808 1677) or the **Samaritans** (www.samaritans.org, 116 123).

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