

# Reaching Out for Help When You Are Grieving

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*“Action is the antidote to despair.” – Joan Baez*

When someone you love dies, you must mourn if you are to renew your capacity for love. In other words, mourning brings healing. But healing also requires the support and understanding of those around you as you embrace the pain of your loss.

I’ve said that the wilderness of your grief is your wilderness and that it’s up to you to find your way through it. That’s true. But paradoxically, you also need companionship from time to time as you journey. You need people who will walk beside you and provide you with “divine momentum”—affirmations that what you are doing is right and necessary for you and will lead to your eventual healing. You do not need people who want to walk in front of you and lead you down the path they think is right, nor do you need people who want to walk behind you and not be present to your pain.

Sharing your pain with others won’t make it disappear, but it will, over time, make it more bearable. Reaching out for help also connects you to other people and strengthens the bonds of love that make life seem worth living again.

## Where to turn for help

“There is strength in numbers,” one saying goes. Another echoes, “United we stand, divided we fall.” If you are grieving, you may indeed find strength and a sense of stability if you draw on an entire support system for help.

Friends and family members can often form the core of your support system. Seek out people who encourage you to be yourself and who acknowledge your many thoughts and feelings about the death. What you need most now are caring, non-judgmental listeners.

You may also find comfort in talking to a minister or other church leader. When someone loved dies, it is natural for you to feel ambivalent about your faith and question the very meaning of life. A clergy member who responds not with criticism but with empathy to all your feelings can be a valuable resource.

A professional counselor may also be a very helpful addition to your support system. In fact, a good counselor can be something friends and family members can’t: an objective listener. A counselor’s office can be that safe haven where you can “let go” of those feelings you’re afraid to express elsewhere. What’s more, a good counselor will then help you constructively channel those emotions.

For many grieving people, support groups are one of the best helping resources. In a group, you can connect with others who have experienced similar thoughts and feelings. You will be allowed and gently encouraged to talk about the person who died as much and as often as you like.

Remember, help comes in different forms for different people. The trick is to find the combination that works best for you and then make use of it.

## The rule of thirds

In my own grief journeys and in the lives of the mourners I have been privileged to counsel, I have discovered that in general, you can take all the people in your life and divide them into thirds when it comes to grief support.

One third of the people in your life will turn out to be truly empathetic helpers. They will have a desire to understand you and your unique thoughts and feelings about the death. They will demonstrate a willingness to be taught by you and a recognition that you are the expert of your experience, not them. They will be willing to be involved in your pain and suffering without feeling the need to take it away from you. They will believe in your capacity to heal.

Another third of the people in your life will turn out to be neutral in response to your grief. They will neither help nor hinder you in your journey.

And the final third of people in your life will turn out to be harmful to you in your efforts to mourn and heal. While they are usually not setting out intentionally to harm you, they will judge you, they will try to take your grief away from you, and they will pull you off the path to healing. Seek out your friends and family members who fall into the first group. They will be your confidants and momentum-givers on your journey. When you are actively mourning, try to avoid the last group, for they will trip you up and cause you to fall.

## How others can help you – three essentials

While there are a multitude of ways that people who care about you might reach out to help you, here are three important and fundamental helping goals. Effective helpers will help you:

1. **Embrace hope.**

These are the people around you who help you sustain the presence of hope as you feel separated from those things that make life worth living. They can be present to you in your loss, yet bring you a sense of trust in yourself that you can and will heal.

2. **Encounter the presence of your loss.**

These are the people who understand the need for you to revisit and recount the pain of your loss. They help you “tell your story” and provide a safe place for you to openly mourn. Essentially, they give you an invitation to take the grief that is inside you and share it outside yourself.

3. **Have “companions” in your journey.**

These people serve as companions through whom your suffering can be affirmed. They are able to break through their separation from you and truly companion you where you are at this moment in time. They know that real compassion comes out of “walking with” you, not ahead of you or behind you. The word grieve means “to bear a heavy burden.” Those who companion you in your grief realize that as they help bear your burden of sorrow, they give you hope that something good will be borne of it.