

# Being With Grief

For friends, family, and everyone else walking beside someone in loss

Adapted from *Being With Grief* (Jonathan Bertman, MD). Not therapy. Not a script. A map.

**The one thing:** Grief isn't a problem to solve. It's a process to witness. Your job isn't to fix their pain — it's to be present while they feel it.

**Note on culture:** This guide reflects common Western norms — individual processing, verbal support. Your community may grieve differently. Religious traditions have their own wisdom. Follow the bereaved person's lead.

## What grief actually is

---

Grief isn't a phase to finish. It's love with nowhere to go. The brain built predictions that included this person — every empty chair, every phone that doesn't ring is a small shock as reality updates.

## What they may be feeling

- **Waves** — sudden, then receding, then again
- **Brain fog** — grief is exhausting; memory and decisions suffer
- **Body symptoms** — chest pain, fatigue, sleep, appetite (severe symptoms → encourage a doctor)
- **Presence** — many sense the deceased in dreams or moments; often comforting
- **Guilt** — the mind searching for something it could control
- **Changed identity** — "Who am I without them?"

There is **no timeline**. Year one can be harder than week one. Both are normal.

# What not to do

---

*Most unhelpful phrases try to fix grief so everyone feels less uncomfortable.*

What people say	What it can sound like
"They're in a better place"	You should feel good about this
"Everything happens for a reason"	Your pain has a purpose you should accept
"I know how you feel"	Your experience isn't unique
"You need to be strong"	Your feelings are a burden
"It's been X months..."	You're grieving wrong
"Let me know if you need anything"	Here's a task I'm unlikely to do
Nothing (avoiding them)	Your grief is too much for me

**Don't compare grief** — not even your own. Don't give advice unless they ask. Don't rush a timeline.

**Permission to be imperfect:** Clumsy presence beats polished absence. The only real failure is abandonment.

# What helps

---

**Show up** — sit, stay, let silence be okay

**Say their name** — they haven't forgotten; neither should you

**Listen without fixing** — "That sounds so hard." Let them repeat themselves

**Specific offers** — "Dinner Tuesday — lasagna okay?" not "call if you need anything"

**Remember the long tail** — month 3, year 1, random Tuesdays

**Tolerate anger** — "You're allowed to be angry"

**Witness guilt** — "That sounds heavy to carry" (don't argue it away)

**Practical help** — food, lawn, dog, paperwork — often without asking first

If you remember one line:

**"I don't know what to say, but I'm here and I love you."**

## Phrases that land

---

### Acknowledging

- "I'm so sorry."
- "This is so hard."
- "There are no words for this."

### Permission

- "However you're feeling is okay."
- "You don't have to be strong."
- "There's no right way to do this."

### Remembering

- "Tell me about them."
- "I miss them too."
- "I haven't forgotten."

## Harder situations (brief)

---

### Sudden or traumatic loss

Don't probe for details. "I can't believe it" may last months. Trauma may need professional support — offer to help *find* it.

### Suicide loss

Say "suicide." Don't speculate why. Repeat: "It's not your fault" (they may not believe it yet). Extra presence — stigma isolates. AFSP (<https://afsp.org>) · Alliance of Hope (<https://allianceofhope.org>)

### Child loss

Never "at least you have other children." Say the child's name. Don't disappear — many do.

### When you're grieving too

You can't pour from an empty cup. Grieving together can itself be support.

### When you can't be there in person

Short, frequent texts beat rare long ones. "No need to reply — thinking of you." Order meals. Coordinate local help.

## When to encourage more help

---

Most grief doesn't need therapy. Watch for red flags: suicidal statements, can't function after many months, escalating substances, complete withdrawal, self-harm, wanting to "join" the deceased.

Say: "**I'm worried about you.**" Offer to make calls or go to a first appointment. If immediate danger → 988 (tel:988) or ER.

This isn't pathologizing grief. It's recognizing when friends aren't enough.

## For the person grieving

---

Send them to the Grief Workbook — interactive, private, no timeline. Or [sum1namedHAL](https://sum1namedhal.com) (<https://sum1namedhal.com>) if they want to talk it through (not therapy).

Acute overwhelm → [apamphlet.com](https://apamphlet.com) (<https://apamphlet.com>) (breathe, ground, wait).

## Crisis resources

---

- **988** — Suicide & Crisis Lifeline (US, call or text)
- **Text HOME to 741741** — Crisis Text Line (US)
- **findahelpline.com** (<https://findahelpline.com>) — International
- **iasp.info** ([https://www.iasp.info/resources/Crisis\\_Centres/](https://www.iasp.info/resources/Crisis_Centres/)) — Global crisis centres

This guide doesn't replace professional care. If someone is in immediate danger, call 988 or local emergency services.

---

Hello World, Softly · [helloworldsoftly.com/supporting.html](https://helloworldsoftly.com/supporting.html) · 988 (US crisis)

Free to share and print. Hello World, Softly.

[apamphlet.com](https://apamphlet.com) (<https://apamphlet.com>) · [sum1namedHAL](https://sum1namedhal.com) (<https://sum1namedhal.com>)