

***“Look closely and you will see almost everyone carrying bags of cement on their shoulders. That’s why it takes courage to get out of bed in the morning and climb into the day.”***

- **Edward Hirsh**

This quote hit home for me. It’s a great reminder that we are surrounded by people who are carrying the weight of the world on their shoulders. We often don’t know what burdens they’re carrying, but for many, that burden is grief. Many are silently grieving and trying to navigate life after the death of a loved one. For those of us who have lost someone, or many someones, getting out of bed each day can sometimes feel like a monumental task. But each day, we get up and put on a brave face so that even those closest to us don’t know our pain. The month of July marks the anniversary of my dad’s death. It’s also the birthday month of the love of my life who was also taken much too soon. Anniversaries, birthdays and holidays are the most difficult for those of us who grieve the loss of a loved one. Since this topic hits very close to home for me, it’s a good time to explain how to help someone who’s grieving. I hope you find it beneficial.

## **Helping Someone Through Grief**



It’s so hard to believe it’s been 13 years since my dad was taken from this place we call planet earth. Until he died, I’d never known what it was like to lose someone I loved. My grandmother died when I was 8, but I was much too young to comprehend what it meant or how it felt. My son was only 7 when my dad died, so I’m sure it was the same for him. I still talk to him about my dad to keep his memory alive. The great thing about my dad was that he didn’t try to tell me how to live my life, because he knew it was my life to live. He did however, let me watch how he did it and he did it so well! After all this time, I still miss and grieve for him and will continue to miss him until he greets me at the gates of heaven, when God decides it’s my time to meet him. Remember, each person grieves in his or her own way and time. But what is grief and how do we help someone we care about through it?

One definition of grief in the Merriam-Webster dictionary is as follows: *“Deep sadness caused especially by someone’s death.”* But what it doesn’t define are the indescribable feelings that come when you lose someone you love. If it hadn’t been for my son, I don’t know how I would have survived my dad’s death. Luke gave meaning and purpose to my life as I tried to comprehend the fact that my dad was gone because he trusted a doctor who ultimately killed him. Watching my dad take his last breath changed me forever and I vowed to do whatever I could to prevent other families from going through what happened to mine. His death, as many of you know, was what put me on the path to find natural ways to get and stay healthy. But I digress.

Elizabeth Kubler-Ross wrote a famous book called, *“On Grief and Grieving”*, which describes finding the meaning of grief through the five stages of loss: Denial, Anger, Bargaining, Depression and Acceptance. The idea is that you have to go through all the stages of grief to heal. Everyone handles each stage a little differently and once a stage is completed, it can be repeated down the road. She states and I agree, that *“people have many different responses to loss, and no response is typical. Each person’s grief is as different as each of us.”* If you’ve never lost anyone, you may not know what to say to or do for someone who has. You can’t comprehend how it feels until you’ve been there. I was the first of my friends to lose a parent, so they struggled with what to say and how to help me through it. Then my best friend lost her mom 6 months after I lost my dad. So I knew a bit about how to help her. Then I lost my mom, my brother and the love of my life. Unfortunately, I’m probably somewhat of an expert on grief! Based on my experience with losing people I loved, here are a few helpful suggestions to help someone who’s grieving.

- **Don’t be afraid to ask, “How are you doing?”**. For some reason, people are afraid to ask this very simple question and I’m not sure why. The person may burst into tears and tell you *“Not good”* or may say something like, *“I’m hanging in there.”* Keep in mind that the response will tell you what you need to do next. Sometimes the best response is a hug, which can work miracles when people are in pain. Touch is very healing. Take the person’s hand into yours. Touch the arm. Or perhaps the answer you’re given will require another question be asked. The most important thing you can do is to listen and respond accordingly. Sometimes the best response is simply do nothing except be there.

- **Go to the memorial service if you can.** I can't tell you how much it meant to me to see not only friends, but also acquaintances and coworkers, who took the time out of their day to attend my family's services. Many of them didn't even know my dad or my brother (or my mom). They simply showed up to support me and let me know they cared. It meant more to me than they will ever know.
- **Do NOT say: "Well, you have your memories."** When someone's grieving, they don't want their memories, they want their loved one back. Making a comment about having memories of their loved one is more insensitive than you realize. What I really appreciated was when someone would tell me a story or some special memory about my dad...especially one I hadn't heard or something I didn't know. One good friend told me about how my dad would call and check up on him as he was going through rehab. I had no idea my dad had done that.
- **Check in.** A simple text like "*Thinking about you*" can do wonders. We may not respond, but don't take it personally. It actually helps us when we're hurting to know we're on someone's mind. Remember that in the beginning, many people are around, calling, texting, stopping by the house....but as the days, weeks and months go by, those check ins dwindle to almost nothing and we feel all alone. Don't disappear. We still want to hear from you so we know you're thinking about us. We live with the loss and the pain every single day. Knowing someone cares can make a world of difference in how we feel.
- **Don't be upset if we don't call you back.** After my dad died, I didn't want to talk to anyone. While tears can be healing, too many can be draining. Sometimes, we just need to be alone in our grief. Don't get mad or feel like we're ignoring you. Be the bigger person and know how much it means that you're thinking about us. We just may not be ready to talk. But when we are ready, be sure to be there, listen and be supportive. We may get repetitive, but it's healing for us to talk about the person we loved.
- **Don't be afraid to talk about our loved one.** I loved it when people would say things like, "*I remember when your dad.....*" It was comforting to know that other people had fond memories of him and that he had touched their lives in some way. Hearing stories about my dad always brought a smile to my face, even if it also brought tears in my eyes. It still does.
- **Understand there will be difficult days.** You never know when they'll pop up. It could be on a birthday, holiday or the anniversary of the death. Sometimes it will be for no reason. One time, I was walking through a store that was piping in music. My dad's favorite Frank Sinatra song, "*My Way*" started to play and I burst into tears. So even when you think we're totally fine, we probably aren't.
- **Don't ever say, "I know how you feel," because you don't.** Even if you've been through it, you still don't know how it feels for someone else. If you haven't been through it, you have absolutely NO IDEA how it feels. Everyone experiences grief and loss differently. I tend to say, "*I get it*" or "*I understand*", because even though I've experienced plenty of loss, I don't know how it feels for someone else. Late last year, a friend unexpectedly lost her husband. Losing someone who shared your heart is much different than losing a parent or a sibling. While I didn't know exactly how she was feeling, I could relate to her loss, which for me, was both a curse and a blessing. I hope that explaining how I felt and how I coped would help her through her own grieving process. Another friend recently lost his son to suicide. While I can't even begin to imagine the pain of losing a child, I do understand the pain of losing someone who decided to take his own life. All I could do for my friend was be there and listen.

The most important thing I can tell you is that when you lose someone you love, you never really get over it. You just learn to live with it. But remember, you can't heal unless you let yourself feel the loss. So allow yourself to grieve. Does each day get a little easier? Eventually. But it takes time to heal, so be patient. There's no shame in holding onto grief. Just ensure you make room in your heart for positive emotions too. It takes a lot of strength to find your way through grief and it can destroy you IF you let it. You MUST grab hold of the life that lies ahead of you and let it pull you forward. Remember that someday, you will see your loved one again. That, probably above all else, gives me comfort. I'll close with a quote by Diamond Rio, (whoever that is), which pretty much sums up my feelings about those I've lost: "*One more day, one more time, one more sunset, maybe I'd be satisfied. But then again, I know what it would do, leave me wishing still, for one more day with you.*"

Have a wonderful month.