Responding With Empathy After a Loss

On any given day, one or more of your friends or colleagues may be experiencing a loss or other difficult situation, such as a breakup, a loved one's illness, or learning that a person they knew has died. Sometimes these events will impact the person's life directly, while in other circumstances, they may be coping with feelings of regret, worry, disappointment, or grief.

Common reactions to a loss include:

- Trouble concentrating or completing familiar tasks
- Becoming upset by little things or at how others are behaving
- An intense focus on work or other activities
- Not wanting to be alone or withdrawing from others
- An increased need to talk or vent feelings
- Crying, increased sensitivity, or irritability
- Feeling overwhelmed, helpless, or hopeless

Some people in these situations may want to talk openly and be comforted, while others may prefer to maintain their privacy. It's important to remember that there is no “correct” way to experience bereavement or cope with reactions. In addition, people who have had difficult losses in the past may feel a renewed sense of grief, even if the current situation doesn't impact their daily life. For example, someone who has lost a parent may be deeply affected upon hearing the news that a friend's parent has died.

While it is human nature to want to take away another person's pain or “fix” the problem, you can't control how others feel. The better option is to be compassionate and offer support. Here are some ways to be helpful:

- Empathetic responses to the news include “I’m sorry about what happened” or “I’m thinking about you.” Avoid statements like, “I know how you feel,” “You need to get on with your life,” or “Everything will be okay.” If you don’t know what to say, admit it.

- Focus on a positive message without including specifics about your spiritual beliefs. Statements like, “I'll pray for you,” while sincerely meant, may be uncomfortable for those who have a difficult relationship with organized religion.

- Ask a friend or colleague who is struggling to join you for lunch or a short walk. If the person wants to talk about the situation, listen and offer understanding. Some people may prefer to talk about other subjects or spend the time in silent companionship. Simply being present may be enough to help someone cope with a rough day.

- If the person is feeling overwhelmed, ask what you can do to help. Offer specific assistance with a work task or a stressful chore. Don’t make promises you can’t keep.

For more suggestions on how to respond with empathy when a friend has suffered a loss, contact LifeMatters. Help is available 24/7/365.

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