

## **DO'S AND DON'T FOR THE BEREAVED AND THEIR WELL-MEANING FRIENDS**

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Here are a few lessons learned, first for people who are grieving, and then for their friends, family and random acquaintances. This is by no means exhaustive, but it's a start (and pretty darned long). I hope some of you find what I've learned over the past 5 months useful.

### **If you're grieving:**

- Take care of your energy. Rest. Don't overdo. You'll be more tired and more vulnerable to illness during this time if you don't. So pick and choose priorities, and treat yourself gently and well.
- Pay attention to what you feel like doing and what you don't feel like doing, and, if it's not too outrageous or expensive, follow suit.
- Don't be afraid of your sadness. It won't kill you. It's just a feeling, after all, and you'll feel better and more energized for letting it move through you. Besides, you will use up tons of energy avoiding it, and it will catch up to you anyway. In the beginning it will come and go in waves, and, just like labor contractions there's relief in the in-between times. Later on it will be more like a flavoring that seeps into the day. This softens over time.
- Avoid people who are annoying. They'll be even more annoying now.
- Expect poor sleep and agitation for a few months, due to elevated levels of stress hormones (this is normal); then a return to more normal sleep patterns, but an upsurge in sadness and greater recognition of loss.
- Don't make any big decisions right away, unless you have to. Let things sift and sort. Otherwise, you could do something really dumb, like sell your house before you're ready, or marry a jerk so you won't have to be alone. Take it slow.
- Maintain some structure, whether it's going to the gym, showing up to work, seeing good friends for lunch, or volunteering at church. The structure will carry you through the times you'd just as soon stay under the covers and suck your thumb.
- Tell people what you need – people who are capable of delivering, that is. The corollary to this is obvious: avoid self-centered or demanding people. Lord knows, they'll keep for later.
- Set good boundaries. Well-meaning people will be offering unsolicited advice, some of it quite bad: or they'll be unwittingly patronizing; or they'll try to get you to do heinous things they think are good for you. Be clear and firm with them, even if you don't feel like it. This will keep you from biting their heads off later on, when you've REALLY had it.
- Take care, because you'll be preoccupied and foggy at times. So watch your driving, double check the subtraction in your check book, and keep an eye on the treads on those stairs.
- Experiment with what you're up for. Don't be rigid in your assumptions. After all, this is a time that will invite you to change and grow, whether you like it or not. Might as well change and grow. Do new, interesting things, return to favorite old things, and meet good, new people.
- Experiment with your autonomy. Use this time to figure out what you want, without this loved one to consult or consider. You might be surprised at what you discover about yourself, if you keep an open mind.
- Don't let people devalue you because of your loss. That's their problem, not yours.
- Help somebody else.

## AND IF YOU'RE FRIENDS OR FAMILY:

- Remember that just expressing your concern and condolences, sincerely but quickly, in a way that doesn't demand a lot back, is plenty. No one expects you to make the pain go away....It's not your job, after all.
- Ask what you can do. And only offer to do things that you can really follow up on. This is not a good time for polite insincerity. (Is there ever?)
- Try not to offer something that you know the person won't want or need. That will only make him or her feel more isolated and disconnected.
- Be respectful of boundaries. Don't ambush a mourner at work or at the gym, clutching his hand with both of yours, looking deeply into his eyes and oozing sympathy. He's trying to maintain composure and focus, and the last thing he needs is a spontaneous Grief Fest initiated by you. (Close friends rarely do this – it's usually a random acquaintance who oversteps in this way.)
- Leave messages – voicemail or e-mail – or send a thoughtful little gift, showing that you're thinking about the person, and asking nothing in return. It's really nice to make it clear that no response is needed or expected.
- Don't make demands; and don't expect a normally good-natured, generous person to be their good-natured, generous selves for several months – maybe even a year or two.
- Expect more irritation and sensitivity from your friend than usual and make allowances.
- Don't go on and on about how devastated, upset and anguished you are over this death or loss. Compared to the mourner's grief, it's a drop in the ocean, and she's hard pressed to care how you feel. So put a lid on it.
- Pay attention to nonverbal cues. Watch for glazed over eyes and fidgeting, and at the first signs of either, stop doing whatever you're doing and regroup by changing the subject or going away.
- Avoid clichés like "At Least He's Not in Pain Now" or "God Only Gives Us What We Can Bear".
- Don't expect the person to get over this in a few months. Not gonna happen. This is a process that extends for 2-3 years at its most intense levels.
- Humor, a juicy piece of community news, or a genuine request for advice in her area of her expertise can be a welcome distraction and a lovely, if temporary, return to normalcy for your grieving friend.
- Mostly, it's all about being watchful, patient, respectful and sensitive; putting aside your needs for the other person; talking less and listening more. Yes, I know – so what else is new?

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