

# RESILIENCE RX™

A free resource

## HOW YOU CAN HELP

*What to say and do  
to help the newly  
bereaved*

*What not to say  
and why*



INTERNATIONAL  
GRIEF INSTITUTE

INVESTING IN COMMUNITY RESILIENCE

# RESILIENCE RX™

## How to help the bereaved

SUGGESTIONS FROM 22 GRIEF  
EDUCATORS ON HOW TO HELP  
IMMEDIATELY AFTER LOSS

From the book,  
Grief Diaries: How to Help the Newly Bereaved



This free resource is designed to provide self-care techniques to support the bereaved with the understanding that the International Grief Institute is not engaged to render any type of psychological, legal, or any other kind of professional advice.



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iCare™

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What to do

“ It is better to have a heart without words than words without a heart.

MAHATMA GANDHI

### Why it matters

Grief is as individual as a snowflake—no two journeys are alike, yet the one commonality we all share is that it's very hard. Offering support and a warm hug is the most precious gift you can give someone who is mourning someone they love, yet many wonder what else they can do to help. Taken from the book, *Grief Diaries: How to Help the Newly Bereaved*, below are suggestions from 22 grief educators who have all lost someone they love.

### Ways you can help

- [Attend the service](#) and spend time with the family. Don't let fear keep you away. Go and offer a heartfelt hug, even if you haven't seen them in years.
- [Keep them fueled](#). Call the funeral home to see if beverage service is provided for the family. Send trays of sandwiches or fruit to the viewing so the family can keep their energy up throughout the day.
- [Take care of the children](#). Offer to watch the children so they can accomplish what needs to be done or take a much-needed nap. Or better yet, drive the kids to practice and buy them a milkshake on the way.
- [Instead of flowers](#), give stamps for all the thank-you cards.
- [Unexpected expenses](#). Send a Wal-Mart gift card to ease financial burden of needing to buy unexpected supplies.

- **Bring or send groceries.** Eating is the farthest thing from their mind, but children and visitors still need to eat. Deliver a meal in disposable, non-returnable containers so they don't have to remember who needs pans replaced when the original gets lost in the shuffle.
- **Look around.** Chores are piling up. Wash dishes or do laundry, take out the garbage, clean the gutters, mow the lawn.
- **Check on them.** Send a quick text without expecting a response. It warms their heart to know you're thinking of them.
- **Long distance.** If you live out of state, send a care package.
- **Share freely.** Share memories of their loved one. It's like music to their ears.
- **Drop and run.** Deliver supplies without expectations of being entertained.
- **A little TLC.** Gift them with a comfort item, such as chocolate, body wash or a scented candle.
- **The pets.** Feed the four-legged family members to alleviate one daily chore.
- **Run interference.** Answer the door, arrange meals or help with mundane chores. Don't wait to be asked.
- **They're so pretty, but....** Divide the memorial flowers after the service. The smell can be overwhelming in their home.
- **Thank-you cards.** Help write them out, seal them shut, apply postage and mail.
- **Care packages.** Leave an anonymous care package on their doorstep so they don't have to write a thank-you card.



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## What to say (and not to say)

“ I did not know how to reach him, how to catch up with him...the land of tears is so mysterious.

ANTOINE DE SAINT-EXUPERY

### Why it matters

When tragedy strikes, it's human nature to say something to comfort the wounded yet many hesitate for fear of saying the wrong thing. Below are statements that are generally soothing, acknowledge the sorrow, validate the pain, and generally helps mourners feel more supported.

### What to say (and why)

#### **“I'm so very sorry.” And then stay quiet.**

This statement says you respect the sorrow without trying to fix it. It reassures the mourner that you feel safe to be around, that you won't try to guide or criticize the journey.

#### **“Would you like to talk? I'm a good listener.”**

The ability to talk openly about a loved one is critical to a mourner's recovery. It's even better if they can do it without parameters. Listen without judgment.

#### **“I'm going to the grocery store. Can I bring you toilet paper?”**

A mourner is often too overwhelmed to know what they need. Even simple decision-making can be difficult. Offering concise choices is very helpful.

#### **“I would love to hear more about \_\_\_\_\_ (the deceased).”**

Many people hesitate to bring up a loved one for fear it will cause more pain. The invitation to share helps a mourner to process the loss. The more they process the loss, the better their recovery.

**Say their loved one's name.**

It doesn't cause more pain, and mourners love hearing it.

**"I heard that feeling crazy is common."**

Grieving can be very scary, and mourners often feel like they're losing control. This statement offers reassurance that wild emotions are normal.

**Prayers are comforting for some.**

Those with steadfast faith find prayers very comforting. But reciting prayers and Scripture is helpful only if they have strong faith, not you. This isn't the time to convert them.

**If all else fails, say nothing.**

Mourners won't remember what you say, but will remember you by their side.

**More suggestions**

- " \_\_\_\_\_ was a wonderful person, and will be greatly missed."
- " \_\_\_\_\_ was very special to me, too. I'm so very sorry."
- "I can't imagine what you're feeling."
- "I don't know what your religious belief is, or if you have one, but please know I'm praying for your comfort."
- "I'm here for you."
- "When you need to talk, I'm available 24/7."
- "I wish I could lessen your pain."
- "My heart hurts for you."
- "Tell me about your loved one."
- "Would you like to go for a walk/movie/dinner?"
- Share a story about their loved one.

## What not to say (and why)

### **“Are you okay?”**

This statement ignores the obvious. And demands an answer.

**Suggestion:** “I’ve been thinking of you. How are you feeling today?” This invites the bereaved to open up.

### **“I understand how you feel.”**

Grief is like a fingerprint—every journey is unique; no two are alike. A key part of healing is being allowed to vent without fear of being compared to someone else, which causes the mourner to feel judged about their own progress.

**Suggestion:** “I have absolutely no idea how you feel. But I’m a good listener and make excellent coffee.”

### **“Time heals all wounds.”**

Time doesn’t heal the pain, nor is the timeline linear. Though the rawness softens over the years and coping skills get stronger, grief can last for life.

**Suggestion:** “I’ve been thinking of you. How are you sleeping?”

### **“At least s/he lived a good long life.”**

When you love someone, their lives are never long enough and loved ones often aren’t ready to say goodbye.

**Suggestion:** “S/he was a very special person.”

### **“Call if you need anything.”**

Mourners are in a fog, not thinking clearly, and often have no idea what they need. They also fear being a burden or aren’t comfortable asking for help.

**Suggestion:** “I’m going to the grocery store. Do you need toilet paper?”

### **“Well, at least s/he is in a better place.”**

This statement can be construed to mean that their loved one is better off dead, which can come across as cold and callous.

**Suggestion:** “I’m terribly sorry for your loss, it must be overwhelming.”

### **“God must have needed him/her.”**

Loss often triggers an examination of one’s faith. Why didn’t God answer our prayers? Why did God let him/her die? It’s hard to make sense of what feels senseless. **Suggestion:** “I’m praying for you.”

**“It will get better every day.”**

The path through healing is very unpredictable. One day they might feel steady on their feet, the next they might feel like they're back at square one. Months, even years, can go by before they feel they can handle their grief.

**Suggestion:** “Some days will be better than others. When you're having a rough day, I'll bring you coffee.”

**“At least s/he isn't suffering.”**

When death occurs after a period of prolonged pain, it's common to feel a sense of relief that the loved one is no longer suffering and we no longer have to watch them struggle. But that relief can also evoke guilt for feeling that way.

**Suggestion:** “It must have been so hard watching your loved one struggle. Please know that I'm a good listener if you want to talk about it.”

**“You are so strong.”**

Or, “You need to stay strong for \_\_\_\_\_.” Suppressed sorrow hinders the ability to recover, and creates confusion over why the mourner feels so emotionally broken. Many feel the need to hide their grief due to societal or familial pressure to be strong, but the only way through grief is to actively grieve.

**Suggestion:** “You don't need to stay strong. We will be strong for you.”

**“It's time to move on.”**

This implies lack of compassion and a sense that you know what's better for the mourner than they do. It also comes across as being told to forget their loved one. Healing can take years, or a lifetime.

**Suggestion:** “I'm so very sorry for your loss.”

**“Loss is part of life.”**

This statement lacks compassion and dismisses one's right to move through the bereavement process. Grief is the natural reaction to loss.

**Suggestion:** “Loss is so terribly hard!”

**“You can have another child.”**

Or, “You'll find someone else.” One person doesn't replace another. Also, when people feel emotional pain, the same areas of the brain get activated as when people feel physical pain. Pain hurts, and in the agony of the moment, it's impossible to stay focused on the future.

**Suggestion:** “Please know I'm thinking of you.”

**“Your loved one is an angel now.”**

Or, "Everything happens for a reason." Not everyone believes in angels or the afterlife. Even if someone is religious, not every religion believes deceased humans become angels. It's best to avoid afterlife or spiritual references unless you are absolutely certain you know the person's belief.

**Suggestion:** "I can't imagine how heartbreaking this must be."

**“Tough it out.”**

Or, "Don't be a baby." Telling someone to tough it out is asking them to hide their grief. This is the worst thing they could do. Never dealing with emotional pain can cause it to grow and intensify over time. Bottling it up can lead to depression, anxiety, hypertension, insomnia, and more. Expressing emotion and shedding tears are important parts of the healing process. Crying allows the body to naturally release endorphins and toxins, and allows the heart to process the sadness so it can make way for the healing.

**Suggestion:** "It's okay to be human."

**Suggestion:** "It's okay to be sad. Tears are an important part of healing."

**Also avoid:**

- "S/he would want you to be happy."
- "Your children need you."
- "You'll be okay."
- "You're young."
- "Think positive thoughts."
- "Appreciate what you had."
- "You knew it was coming."

While intellectually many of these statements are true, they don't change one's need to process their loss.

**Say these instead:**

- "I've been thinking of you."
- "How are you sleeping?"
- "I have absolutely no idea how you're feeling, but please know I have a good ear for listening."
- "S/he was a very special person."
- "Loss is so terribly painful."

## Forget-me-nots

- Recognize that you can't fix someone's sorrow. Loss takes years to process.
- Honor the mourner's choice for how s/he wishes to cope with their loss, even if you don't agree. They instinctively know what's best for themselves.
- Do not avoid them. If they ask to be left alone, honor their wishes if it's safe to do so. Otherwise, include them in activities and treat them as you would any other significantly injured friend: with kindness, compassion, and gentleness.
- Resist the urge to fill their calendar as a way to cheer or distract them. Just like all healing, grieving is exhausting and the mourner may not have the energy to keep up.
- If you live or work with the bereaved, their sorrow can quickly deplete your own joy. Give yourself permission to take time out.
- Expect the bereaved to have cranky moments. Pain in any form can easily overload their emotional threshold. If you're having difficulty finding compassion during one of these moments, take a breather for yourself and go run errands or do something fun.
- Crying is a normal, healthy response to emotional pain. Suppressed grief leads to complications. As talking and crying go hand in hand, the bereaved need the gift of listening every single day.
- Grief is an emotional wound. Think of it as a severe injury to the heart. For this reason, it is helpful to think of mourners as a patient in an emotional ICU. Treat them as you would any other hospital patient: with tender loving care, compassion and kindness.
- Grief is often compared to a rollercoaster because it contains emotional twists and blind turns at varying speeds. It is very unpredictable, and can feel very scary.
- Ignoring grief is dangerous. It doesn't go away any faster when you ignore it, and doing so can actually prolong it. Ignoring grief can also cause further complications such as health issues and suicidal ideation.



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## A word about resilience

“ Life doesn’t get easier or more forgiving,  
we get stronger and more resilient.

JAMAIS CASCIO

### What is resilience?

Resilience is the ability to adapt to life difficulties—including loss of a loved one. Building resilience through strategies that support the brain, body, and emotions during difficult times can help reduce the damaging effects of grief.

### The goal

The goal of Resilience Rx™ is to offer self-help techniques that trigger positive hormones—dopamine, serotonin, and oxytocin—to help support you as you learn to move forward with your loved one in your heart.

### How do you strengthen resilience?

The first step is to take good care of yourself. We can’t always predict loss and other stressors, but practicing self-help techniques that tend to our physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual needs can help us to weather the storms.

There are multiple ways to trigger positive hormones. Use this Resilience Rx™ resource as one of your tools in your self-care toolbox to help lift your spirits and soothe your heart when mourning the loss of someone you love.