



How to Talk to Seniors About Grief

Please Note: This tip-sheet is for staff at senior centers and senior-serving organizations. This is not meant to be a clinical document, merely a support.

Reports from the CDC have shown that 8 out of 10 deaths reported from COVID-19 in the United States have been in adults 65 years and older. This means many older adults have lost someone close to them. Many of these deaths may have been unexpected and shocking. The loss of a loved one may increase one's own fears of mortality.

When someone you know or care for is grieving a loss of a loved one or friend, it can be difficult to know what to say or do. Those who are grieving need to feel that their loss is acknowledged, it's not too terrible to talk about, and their loved one won't be forgotten.

Your job as a staff member is to listen. When it seems appropriate, ask open-ended questions – without being nosy – that invite the grieving person to openly express their feelings. You can ask, “Do you feel like talking?,” to let the grieving senior know you're available to listen.

Here's how to talk to someone who's grieving:

- Acknowledge the situation. For example, you could say something as simple as: “I heard that your sister died.” By using the word “died” you'll show that you're more open to talk about how the grieving person really feels.
- Express your concern. For example: “I'm sorry to hear that this happened to you.”
- Let the bereaved talk about how their loved one or friend died. People who are grieving may need to tell the story over and over again. Repeating the story is a way of processing and accepting the death. By listening patiently and compassionately, you're helping your friend heal.
- Ask how the grieving senior feels. The emotions of grief can change rapidly so don't assume you know how the bereaved person feels at any given time. Again, put the emphasis on listening.
- Let the grieving senior know that it's okay to cry in front of you, to get angry, or to break down.
- Be genuine in your communication, but don't try to minimize. You also don't need to try to agree or disagree with the senior if they express anger or frustration about the circumstances around their loved one's death. It's far better to just listen or simply comment: “I'm not sure what to say, but I want you to know I care.”
- Be willing to sit in silence. Don't press if the grieving senior doesn't feel like talking. You can offer a squeeze of the hand or a reassuring hug.
- Offer your support. Ask what you can do or how you can be helpful.

Unless you are a licensed clinical professional, it is important to remember active listening is not counseling or therapy. If a discussion begins to deepen, you should offer referrals to crisis counseling hotlines, support groups, and other clinical resources.

There are many crisis response hotlines available that offered trained support 24-7. You can access them in the Older Adults Programming: COVID-19 Resource Toolkit here. It's recommended that your senior center/senior-serving organization provide information on grief support networks. You can visit 211oc.org to search for a grief support group that's local to the senior.

Various senior centers, hospitals, nonprofits, and faith-based organizations around Orange County also offer grief support groups. You can find further information in the Resource Toolkit here.