

Caring for families

# Along The Way

Helping you understand your  
journey through grief.

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# The Battle Against Loneliness

By John Kennedy Saynor



If I were to ask you to list words that describe your experience of grief, that list would be a long one. Words such as sadness, loss, guilt, fear, tears, helplessness and hopelessness would be just a few in a seemingly endless list. One word that appears regularly in this list is “loneliness.” People often say to me, “The worst part of the day is the morning or the evening.” This is true because the morning and the evening are oftentimes in the day we spend with our loved ones. It is then we realize more acutely that our loved one is really gone. Loneliness may be the most paralyzing feeling people experience.

The journey through grief is a very difficult one. However, if we reach out to those around us, it will be more possible to eliminate much of the loneliness and know the support and encouragement of others. How then can you help yourself fight off loneliness? Here are some ideas:

- 1.** In the “helping others to help you” department, let your family and friends know that you need and want their support. This isn’t a pity party, it is simply responding to their efforts to support you. How? Have a list ready. Let someone take you to a doctor’s appointment. Ask a friend to go grocery shopping with you. If someone invites you for dinner, accept the invitation.



## Ask a friend to go for a walk in the park with you. It is an opportunity to be outdoors and you can chat as you walk.

**2.** If someone suggests you to go for lunch, ask that person when. If you are given the choice of a place to go, have some place in mind where you are comfortable and where you will be able to talk.

**3.** If you are having a bad day, let close friends know it is a bad day. “Be patient with me, please” is all that needs to be said.

**4.** If someone asks you how you are doing, it is because they want to know. Be honest. Let the person know that although you may appear to be doing well, you are still hurting and the loneliness and sadness are sometimes crippling. Honesty helps build strong, supportive friendships.

**5.** Take the initiative in talking about the one who has died. Often friends think it will upset you. Perhaps you are upset if they aren’t talking about the one who has died. If you mention the name of the one who has died, it will give them permission to do it and everyone will feel better. Remember friends grieve the death as well as close relatives.

**6.** Crying with your friends is better than bearing the pain alone. Some of your longtime friends need to cry with you.

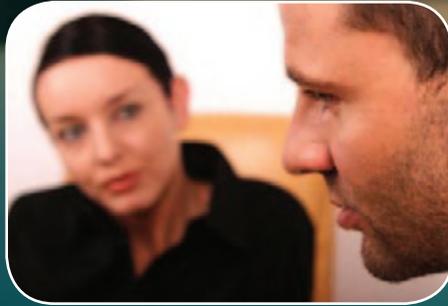
**7.** If someone calls and offers to bring a casserole for dinner, ask that person to stay and eat it with you. Many recently bereaved people don’t have the energy to prepare a meal for guests. If the guest brings supper, then all you have to do is set the table. Chances are your guest will stay and help you do the dishes too.

**8.** Exercise fights depression. Ask a friend to go for a walk in the park with you. It is an opportunity to be outdoors and you can chat as you walk. Then you can decide where you will go for coffee or tea after that.

**9.** Draw on the resources of your spirituality. Take time each day to be quiet and reflect on the words and music of your faith. “I will never leave you or forsake you” and “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil” may take on new meaning for you. You are not alone.

**10.** I am a great believer in support groups. In a group of bereaved people you will meet others in the same position as you. You will receive support and encouragement. You will also meet people who may, as a result of the group, become good friends. Seek out a support group. It may well be an important step towards fighting loneliness.

Although most people feel life has come to an end following the death of a loved one, it is possible and highly likely that you can experience a full recovery to a happy, yes happy, and meaningful life. But the decision is yours, basically. You can choose to live or die. Fortunately most people choose to live and make a successful recovery. Deal loneliness a death blow by letting others into your life who will walk through your grief with you and support you and encourage you as you recreate your life.



# Helping a Newly Bereaved Person

By John Kennedy Saynor

Perhaps you are one of many people who stand by helplessly when a friend experiences the death of a loved one wondering what you can do. It is often frustrating for those on the sidelines who would like to help. The question is, “What can I do?” Often those who are bereaved don’t know what they want. It is also true that many people spend their lives looking after others and don’t do well at being looked after.

Often, those who want to help are not very good at imagining what it is that needs to be done. We are often hindered by our own difficulty dealing with death and all the issues that death raises in our own minds.

Having said that, one doesn’t need to be a trained psychologist or counsellor to provide meaningful assistance to those in need at this time.

I would like to look first at some of the things to avoid and then discuss what is helpful to those who are bereaved.

## What doesn't help?

**Avoiding the bereaved.** It may seem obvious that if you want to help, you don’t avoid the bereaved. People use all

sorts of excuses: “I don’t know what to say,” “I didn’t know them that well,” or “I may upset them if I break down.” Meanwhile the bereaved are saying, “Where are all the people I thought were going to help?”

### **Being afraid to shed tears with the bereaved.**

Oddly enough, this gives the bereaved an opportunity to comfort someone and it helps them realize they are not alone in their grief.

**Offering platitudes.** There are many timeless platitudes you are familiar with: “I know how you feel,” “She is better off,” “It’s God’s will,” or “He had a good long life.” These are designed to help the bereaved feel better but often don’t.

**Rushing the bereaved.** Many of us genuinely want our friends to move past the extreme pain of grief and move on to the next chapter of their life. But this takes time – months or even years. Don’t rush the bereaved. Be patient with the process.

**Not talking about the one who died.** People are often afraid to mention the person who has died for fear of upsetting the survivors. The fact is that many bereaved people have told me that they are upset because nobody talks about the one who has died.



## Be willing to listen.

Now I would like to share some thoughts about how you can help a bereaved person.

### What helps?

**Your presence.** Probably the overriding emotion that most bereaved people feel is that of loneliness. There are all kinds of ways you can be present to a grieving person: grocery shopping, a quick lunch, drop in for a quick visit, a drive to church or just to go for a walk. Begin contact, if possible, soon after the funeral. In the first week, make a call or pay a short visit just to touch base and keep the lines of communication open.

**Understand the symptoms of grief.** Most people experience to some degree an intense loneliness, anxiety for the future, a deep sadness, a debilitating anger and mental confusion. Knowing these and other symptoms will enable you to reassure your friend that these feelings are normal, healthy symptoms of grief and will pass with time.

**Remember weekends, holidays and evenings are most difficult.** Try to include the bereaved in activities during these difficult hours. Eating alone on Saturday evening when you are used to socializing is very difficult.

**Be willing to listen.** Even a good professional counsellor knows that the best counsellor is one who listens. When you give a friend a chance to talk, you are giving them a chance to tell their story. This is an important aspect of grieving. You do not have to be a “fixer,” just a “listener.”

**Pay special attention to children.** Children in the family, like everyone else, need a sense that life is going on and there are still some things about life that are “normal.” That is where friends and other relatives come in. When those people disappear from the family stage, it further destabilizes life for the children. Although it will be helpful for a newly widowed parent to socialize without younger children, it will also be helpful to include children whenever it is appropriate.

**Be aware of agencies that can help.** Bereavement support groups have been a great help to many bereaved people. Your local funeral director, doctor or clergyperson will be able to point you in the right direction.

**Give a grieving person space and time to be alone.** Although these times may be painful for a bereaved person, it is during times alone that important aspects of grief work is done. For instance, a person begins to understand at a deep level that their loved one is truly not coming back. It is during times alone that one begins to put things into perspective and develop a new vision for living. It is also during times alone that a grieving person does the deep work of mourning the loss of a loved one without worrying about what others are thinking.

In closing, let me say that when a bereaved person feels there are those who understand and care and will take the time to walk this journey with them, it makes a big difference. If you can be that person, your life will be enriched knowing that you have accompanied someone on what may be the most difficult journey of their life.

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