

Tips for Supporting Grieving College Students and Young Adults

Adapted from: *We Get It: Voices of Grieving College Students and Young Adults (2015)* by Heather L. Servaty-Seib and David C. Faigenbaum.

- Display empathy rather than sympathy and acknowledge the depth of grief. Remain open to hearing about all aspects of his or her grief without pitying the grieving person. Avoid comments and statements that imply judgement, minimize the griever's experience, or attempt to placate.
- Keep the support going. Grief does not end and it is not a linear process. Avoid implying a timeline for grief.
- Recognize and communicate the fact that grief does not end. In the words of Keanu Reeves: "Grief does not end – it changes shape."
- Be present and offer tangible and practical support when appropriate. Avoid giving specific advice, trying to "fix them," or trying to make it all better. Avoid making statements that begin with "You should" or "You will." These statements are too directive. Instead you could begin your comments with: "Have you thought about..." or "You might..."
- Be open to the topic of grief and try not to avoid it. You may think that avoiding the topic is saving the griever from pain, but actually such avoidance can add to their pain. They are thinking about their grief, so when you bring it up you are likely opening an important window that will allow them to share.
- Provide opportunities for genuine expression of grief without judging. Allow for the expression of negative emotions and be able to sit with them – with the griever and with his or her challenging feelings. You do not need to feel pressure to "fix" their feelings.
- Ask about the loved one(s) who died. Display your interest in learning about that person with questions, such as "Tell me something special about your deceased loved one."
- Consider your own strengths and relationship with the person who is grieving – what can you uniquely offer?
- Be open to the uniqueness of grief and acknowledge that uniqueness, rather than sending messages that there is one right way to grieve or implying that you know more about their grief than they do.
- Be consistent and persistent in your messages of care and concern. They don't have to be huge gestures.
- Encourage memorializing their loved one by participating in community service or pledge to participate along with them.
- Avoid making assumptions that someone is doing great and "all better" based on their outward appearances – grieving is an internal process (e.g. feelings, body sensations, and other individual differences) that may never be seen.
- If the grieving college student or young adult is suicidal, it is your moral and ethical responsibility to find/refer him or her to a mental health professional. National Suicide Prevention Hotline 1-800-273-8255

For more, you can check out the entire book *We Get It: Voices of Grieving College Students and Young Adults* at our Grief Resource Lending Library located at Hamilton's on Westtown Parkway (3601 Westtown Parkway, West Des Moines).

