**CHAPTER 12**

**Helping Others Grieve: The Art of Presence**

From the day I heard that my daughter, Chris, had died of an overdose, I had the very strong desire to make sure her death helped others. What I didn’t know was how much my efforts for her death to help other people would help me.

Grief can be transformative. This book is an emotional map, a guide for how to show up for the transformation and not get stuck in any of the boggy, rigid places. It can also be transformative and very moving to be close to someone who is grieving and to help him or her in whatever way you can. I suggest that people grieving reach out to others—I found that helped me, while helping others at the same time. This chapter is designed specifically as a guide to supporting and assisting others when they are not personally in grief.

**Sharing Grief**

The desire to give meaning to Chris’s death led to the project with my son, Bill, of interviewing people who had suffered losses similar to our own. It helped me so much to connect with people who had lost a loved one to addiction—I was helping them, and they were helping me. And, at the same time, Bill and I were grieving together—a win, win, win.

I remember interviewing a woman who had lost her daughter to an overdose. She told me through tears what a “sweet heart” her daughter had possessed. I identified with her description of her daughter’s heart in my feelings about Chris, and I will never forget the rush of feelings her words stimulated in me. Our daughters had both been addicted to heroin and had died as a result of it. However, we both knew who our daughters had really been, despite their illnesses and the direction their lives had taken.

The same woman had also endured the suicide of her husband a week after her daughter’s overdose. I was struck by her courage and ability to live on without both of them. She was a very spiritual woman who found comfort in her religion and prayer life. Although I couldn’t relate to her spiritual beliefs, we connected in our stories and in the belief that our daughters were okay and that we could survive without them.

I encourage you to find ways to share your experiences and to learn how to be present in a different way to the pain and sorrow of others. There is a tradition from the Native American culture called “Story Medicine,” and I have found that it is the best medicine one can imagine. It is the ancient tradition, which predates the written word, of telling each other our stories. Poet Maya Angelou wrote, “There is no greater agony than carrying around an untold story within yourself.” The challenge is getting the “medicine” out to a receptive audience.

Sharing your experiences can be a tricky balance if you’ve both had big losses. Take turns listening and expressing your stories. There can be a kind of magic that happens when painful stories are shared and the human connection of compassion is sparked. Telling your stories and possibly even crying together can be amazingly comforting to both the teller and the listener. Finding a deeper compassion in myself turned out to be one of the gifts I received from my ruthless grief.

**Encourage Personal Expression**

One of the most important aspects of supporting others in grieving is leaving room for them to express themselves in their own way. Do not impose your ways on others; let them explore their own creative processes, and leave room for them to be somewhat ruthless on their own behalf. Encourage them to do or express whatever is in their heart at the moment, while helping them to be “on their own side” about it. Part of your intention can be to have no judgments about anything others need to express. Let them speak about shame or guilt or regret, and then gently remind them of compassion for themselves. Often people in grief think that they are doing it wrong, so try telling them that they are doing okay if you can find any way that could be the truth. There is no wrong way to grieve, but please be aware of the warnings in Chapter 3 about the risks of medicating, comparing, or isolating.

**Showing Up for Those in Loss**

My first conscious experience with death happened when I was in second grade. A little girl from my neighborhood in Queens died suddenly of a burst appendix. She was from a large family, and news travelled around the neighborhood that the youngest girl had died. No one spoke about it in my home (my parents didn’t deal well with death—my father’s mother died when he was eleven years old, but he never grieved her). We had not been close to the girl’s family, but not speaking about the girl’s death felt like a deafening silence. I avoided speaking to anyone in the girl’s family and felt bad about that. I couldn’t face them and felt awkward and out of place anywhere near them. Not only did I not know what to do or say, but I felt as if they had a contagious disease, which I didn’t want to catch.

In hindsight, I realize that I had no preparation or maturity to show up for that family. I don’t remember my parents doing anything either. No one told me about just “being there,” but at the time I don’t think I would have had the capacity to do it. Although I think it is a common and very human mistake, I always felt bad about my behavior around that death and knew there was something wrong with my response.

I remember having a similar reaction in college when a girl in my class lost her parents in a fire. I just avoided her until enough time passed that I wouldn’t have to mention it. Another time, a new girlfriend in graduate school lost her mother to cancer, and I didn’t go to the funeral because I was going camping. Those mistakes linger in my psyche and were not my best behaviors, nor who I am today.

Today I know about showing up for people in their loss, whether that is to make a call, send flowers, or simply write a note. You can even stop someone who is grieving when you pass him or her on the street and offer an invitation to get together for coffee, or offer a friendly word of comfort, something like, “I’ve been thinking about you and wish you well.”

Showing up is important and can take whatever form you wish. It’s not about what you say; it’s just about being with someone in a compassionate and loving way. Don’t be the one who avoids people in loss if you can possibly help it. Any gesture will do, but do something if you have any feelings about what happened to them.

**Be Generous**

Because I am a psychotherapist, clients have recounted their grieving experience to me years after their loss. These experiences are embedded in their psyches because they were turning points in their lives, and psychic wounds don’t just go away if not confronted and shared. All the details need to be told and witnessed.

In addition to being witnessed, it is necessary for grieving people to feel loved and cared for. They probably feel quite alone and even abandoned by the person who died. That can translate into feeling abandoned by the people around them. Be curious, and be as generous as you can with time and energy. It made a deep impression on me, right after each loss, when people would come over and be so generous with their time. Know that you are dealing with someone who might be cracked open. Don’t open up a big, personal conversation and then leave suddenly or in the middle of the talk. Plan to be generous with your time.

Remember my friend Anita, who said she would never forget the turkey that neighbors cooked and left for her family? She said she felt loved and cared for, even though she had no appetite. A caring gesture can change everything for the mourners.

My friend Sam told me about how he felt seeing neighbors, who had had a similar loss, walking up his driveway a few days after his brother had died suddenly in a car accident. When he saw them approach, he knew that here were people who could understand how he was feeling. It was the first time he felt any hope that he and his family could get through his brother’s death.

**The Art of Presence**

David Brooks wrote an op-ed for the *New York Times* called “The Art of Presence.” It’s specifically about a family who lost one grown daughter in a horseback-riding accident and whose other daughter was seriously injured a few years later when hit by a car while riding a bicycle. Her face was disfigured and would never be the same. The mother wrote an article for Sojourners.net*,* which sparked David Brooks to write about the art of being present to someone who is in grief and loss.

He describes how showing up for a friend or family member in loss requires sensitivity and what he calls “the art of presence.” The term speaks for itself, but I love that being present is described as an “art.” That requires a creative way of listening and an immediacy that puts both people in the moment in a very real way.

The family Brooks wrote about “said they were awed after each of their tragedies by the number of people, many of whom had been mere acquaintances, who showed up and offered love”[[1]](#footnote-1) and support from all over the world. That was definitely my experience, and it helped enormously. Don’t think you are too distant from someone to make some contact. Sometimes the surprising gesture from someone not that close is one that touches your heart. For example, a well-known hair stylist who was a friend of my husband, Bob, came up to me shortly after Bob died and said he would like to give me a free haircut and styling. I was a little overwhelmed by his generosity, but I still go to his salon annually for the gift of my amazing beauty lift, and it means the world to me.

**Judging Who Shows Up and Who Doesn’t**

I have heard people say, “You really know who your friends are when you see who shows up.” I strongly disagree. The people who show up are the ones who are able to, and there is no predicting who those might be. Think of Blanche Dubois (*A Streetcar Named Desire*)and “the kindness of strangers.” Give support when you can, make a generous gesture of any kind, and encourage the griever to focus on who is there rather than on who is not.

My friend Anita was unable to deal with Bob’s impending death and didn’t show up to say good-bye, even though she knew he was dying. She did not come for the funeral or even make much contact. She had experienced much traumatic loss in her own life, and she was unable to deal with more. It probably could have helped her, and we could have helped each other, but I accepted her inability to show up at the time. A year after Bob died, she was able to come to his memorial. I know being there meant a lot to her, and she was especially grateful that I didn’t judge her for not being there earlier.

During the second year after Bob’s death, Anita and I wound up spending a lot of time together. We became much closer friends through sharing our losses and our pain. We even took an annual vacation together to the Caribbean for several years after we reconnected. I found her to be an extremely soulful and compassionate friend, even though her initial response had disappointed me. Stay as openhearted as you can, and encourage those you are helping to do the same.

If you are close to someone who is grieving, I suggest you help them keep from building resentments about who shows up and who doesn’t. Focusing on who does show up is so much more enriching for all involved. This is one of the many ways you can provide a voice of compassion and reason in a possibly chaotic and emotionally irrational environment.

**The Ministry of Presence**

There seems to be no way to predict who would step up and provide “the ministry of presence,” as Brooks calls it[[2]](#footnote-2), and who would not. It is not about who was closer or cared more, but just who is capable and/or willing to be there with sensitivity and love, when it is needed. The right people will be there, and the ones who aren’t are missing a chance for a meaningful interchange.

**Physical Gestures**

Feel free to bring food or flowers or to make physical gestures of care. The nonverbal expressions of love to those who are grieving are as healing as the words. You might notice grungy sponges in their sink or that they’re missing paper towels; replacing things can feel overwhelming to those who are grieving. Little acts of kindness can go a long way to help grievers feel cared about. I remember feeling touched when someone I didn’t know very well arrived at my house with a big case of soda. Even though it was something I don’t drink, others did, and I felt loved.

Cards and notes can be very nourishing and helpful. I still remember some things that were on the cards people sent after Bob died. One said, “If you think of me, I am there. Where else would I be?” That felt so warm and spiritual at a time when I felt totally bereft and alone. I could also keep the note with me and refer to it when needed. Hallmark cards have bad press, but if you are someone to whom words don’t come easily, go through the cards in a shop and pick one whose picture and words express your own feelings. Just be sure to do something if you are at all touched by this loss.

**Allowing Space**

Sometimes I think we tell ourselves that the mourner needs a lot of space as a way to avoid the deepest part of our own feelings. Those who are grieving often need less space than you would think, especially early on. When they need to be alone, I suggest being in the next room and available to help. A loving, helpful presence in the house is invaluable at times of deep loss. When you cannot be there physically or the relationship doesn’t warrant such closeness, clearly express that you will be on the other end of the phone and “on call” whenever needed. Even if you’ve offered that, still check in with a phone call: “Just calling to see how you are. I’ve been thinking about you and want to know how it’s going. I’ve also been thinking about (your loved one who died) and . . .” Do not assume that those who are grieving will call you if they need you. They might not. It’s often not about them needing space—it’s about their inability to reach out. Check in with them when you are able.

**Attunement**

Very closely allied with the art of presence and giving the griever space is the concept of attunement. People who are grieving need to know that they are not alone. At the same time, they are often raw in different ways and desire aloneness. Being sensitive to others’ needs means picking up on cues that someone is receptive, at that moment, to our version of “helping.” One hopes that grievers will signal their wants or needs to the people around them, but sometimes they are unable to. They may not be able to say, “This doesn’t help me right now,” so you will need to watch for cues. You might even teach them that phrase to use with you and others.

There’s a joke about parents who are unable to tune in to their child because they are only concerned with their own needs: “I’m cold, so you need to put on a sweater.” That is not attunement. Whether you think someone should be crying more or crying less is immaterial—let them be. Don’t oppose what others do in their grief unless it is dangerous in some way. For everything else, let them be. There is nothing helpful about being the “tone deaf” person who arranges a big dinner for the griever when that is the last thing he or she wants right now.

**Don’t Cry Harder than They Do**

As a therapist in training many years ago, I remember learning a basic guideline for helping people get through their pain, and how to give them space to feel their feelings while honoring our own. It’s about not taking too much psychic space with someone and giving him or her lots of room.

Here’s the background: As a psychotherapist, when I hear a painful story, of course there will be times when I am emotionally touched, and I might cry some. There are schools of therapy (based on the medical model) that highly discourage the therapist from showing any emotion at all. However, my training was not traditional and was based on a relational model, where the therapist is very real with her clients. The rule of thumb I learned about this was, “Don’t cry harder than your client.” This is somewhat tongue-in-cheek, but also has a lot of validity.

This is also symbolic, in the sense that any of your own unresolved grief can interfere with making a space for the person in loss to honor and express his or her own feelings. I learned to hold myself back enough to give my clients room to have their own experience without imposing mine on them. If I tear up while sitting with a client, I just breath through it, and I might or might not tell them what my feelings were about after his or her own feelings have been fully expressed.

I mentioned early on that the griever needs to be able to say, “That doesn’t help me right now” when others launch into long stories about their own losses. The griever does need lots of psychic space for his or her own expression of feelings. I suggest giving them a lot. Be attuned to your audience, keep a damper on your own self-absorption, and be available to mostly just listen.

**Avoid Comparisons**

I have noticed that a kind of hierarchy can develop in grievers that is completely not helpful; for example, “Oh, you lost a child, so your grief is much worse” may or may not be true, but it is definitely not what the griever (or anyone) needs to hear. Remember that there is no comparing pain, and any comparisons fall short of what loss is really about. I have done some of my deepest therapeutic work ever with people who have lost a beloved pet; there is no comparing pain.

Don’t say, “I understand what it’s like to lose a child. A little girl in my neighborhood died, and that was hard, too.” Even if the comparison seems more germane, don’t make it. Each trauma needs to be respected in its uniqueness. Every story can be heard attentively in its own right.

**Anger**

People who are grieving are frequently angry. Know that as you approach them, they may come back with irritation or opposition. Let them. There can be a lot of statements like, “You don’t understand,” or “You haven’t experienced this.” Let the griever vent, and then come back with curiosity. “You’re right. Tell me what it’s like,” can be very supportive to someone who is grieving. Be available to his or her anger, and know that it is just a very powerful part of the grieving process.

Sometimes I will say to a grieving client, “This will change you, so let it. Show up consciously for what is happening, and you will be more whole when you are through it.” Sometimes this makes people angry; let them be angry. The transformative aspect of grief is one of the basic messages of this book, and that message may or may not be appropriate to express to the griever at any given moment. Use your intuition, but don’t be afraid to confront someone’s anger if you wish to say something that may be giving the griever a gentle nudge in one direction or another. Using the phrase “Of course you’re angry” can feel supportive to the person who hears it. When one feels anger while in grief, it often doesn’t feel like part of the process, so being reminded that it is can be affirming and sometimes a great relief.

**Saying the “Right” Thing**

When you are helping someone in grief, you may be concerned about having the “right thing” to say. Mostly, you will need to give up that idea so you can feel a little more comfortable around the person who is grieving. However, I do have a few more suggestions. Many grievers think they are doing it wrong, so it can be important and helpful to reassure them; sometimes the most comforting thing a griever can hear is, “You are doing a wonderful job.” Remember the story I told about crying on the phone with my friend Shirley, saying I thought I’d been doing so well? Shirley told me I was doing well right then, while I was crying my eyes out. That touched me deeply and changed my view of what “doing well” in grieving really meant.

**Talking about the Deceased**

When I lost Bob and Chris, hearing how important each of them had been to people and that they were loved and appreciated was very helpful to me. Many people told me how much Bob had helped them and how funny and enjoyable he was to be with. Chris had been missing in my life and the lives of those around me for so long that appreciating her life was more difficult. However, many people told me what a wonderful young woman she had been and what a creative unique spirit she was. Hearing people around me commenting on what Bob and Chris had meant to them literally warmed my heart and helped me through my losses in major ways. I needed to know that people honored who they had been to them and that they were remembered with love.

I encourage you to make the person who has died a natural part of the conversation. Don’t avoid talking about them because you think you are protecting the griever from pain. It still means so much to me, fourteen years later, for someone to talk about Chris or Bob in conversation.

**Communication and Platitudes**

As with most communication, “I statements” are suggested, as opposed to “you statements.” Gentleness is also a key to saying something helpful to the griever. Statements like, “When my mother died, what helped me the most was . . .” can be useful and supportive. “You might want to consider inviting someone to help you with. . .” is often more appreciated and more effective than, “You know what I think you need to do is . . .”

Do not tell the griever, “You’ll get over it.” People who are grieving don’t usually want to “get over it.” They need to feel what they feel. It’s also not a good idea to say, “You will never get over it.” Getting “over it” is the wrong approach, whether you say they will or they won’t. Getting through it is what everyone needs, but someone who is grieving may only be able to hear that at certain times. “I know you can get through this,” might sound better, but you still may tap into their anger, which is fine. Sometimes I do say, “You won’t always feel this way.” I needed to know that when I was in my deepest grief, and sometimes hearing it had a good effect.

Be sure not to say, “It’s all for the best.” Unrooted optimism can be very irritating and unhelpful to someone in deep grief. It is even important to be aware when a spiritual or religious axiom is appropriate or when it is not. “They are in a better place” can be fine if those who are grieving are torturing themselves with images of their loved one suffering in the afterlife or with their own memories and images of how the person died. If they are just crying and needing to feel sad, some spiritual soothing can feel out of place.

Don’t try to shut down the mourner’s feelings. There is a fine line between protecting yourself from your own sadness or unresolved grief and helping the person in loss avoid unnecessary suffering. An example of this is someone haunted by the image of a fatal accident and who seems to be tortured by the traumatic memories. This would be a time to be more soothing and to affirm to the griever that his or her loved one is safe or at peace and not suffering in that way right now. Sometimes I need to keep my soothing thoughts to myself (and actually soothe myself instead of others) when someone seems to need to shed tears. I think of the medical term “a productive cough,” which means coughing is bringing up toxic material that needs to come out of the body. In grief, the term could be “a productive cry,” which would be when the griever needs to get out the pain and even toxins from the grieving process.

**Exercising Patience**

I frequently use the word *mystery* when I’m helping others grieve. When and how people die is a complete mystery. We cannot make sense out of the inexplicable. Most of us need to try to figure it out for a while, until we surrender to the fact that there is no logical reasoning to it. Remember that the griever is on a journey toward acceptance, and sometimes that can be a long and rocky road. Be aware of your own impatience. If you’re feeling impatient with someone else’s process, talk more to a third party or yourself about it. Protect the griever from any impatience you might have with the way he or she is grieving; a grieving person has his or her own timing, feelings, concerns, unique needs, and ruthlessness or lack thereof.

David Brooks wrote,

I’d say that what these experiences call for is a sort of passive activism. We have a tendency, especially in an achievement-oriented culture, to want to solve problems and repair brokenness—to propose, plan, fix, interpret, explain and solve. But what seems to be needed here is the art of presence—to perform tasks without trying to control or alter the elemental situation. Allow nature to take its course. Grant the sufferers the dignity of their own process. Let them define meaning. Sit simply through moments of pain and uncomfortable darkness. Be practical, mundane, simple and direct.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**Moments of Joy**

There are moments of joy in situations where you would never expect to find them. Let yourself have them, and help the grieving person enjoy them if at all possible. I would also suggest making yourself available for laughter when it comes. Happiness can definitely be part of someone’s grieving process and your interactions with him or her. Someone who is grieving may have spiritual experiences and amazing insights and awareness that turn into a quirky perspective that can seem comical. Awe can turn to joy and laughter in a flash. There is a place for gallows humor or silly interchanges if the time is right. I remind you of how my friend and I laughed at what Chris was wearing in the coffin and saying that she would not have been found dead in that. It was shocking, but riotously funny at the time.

My basic suggestion about helping others grieve is to *just do something*. Don’t avoid the situation, and have the courage to show up on some level, no matter what. One of the basic messages of this book is that full-spectrum grieving can lead us into full-spectrum living. You can help someone get there by being open to his or her own process and by being sensitive to all the parts of his or her journey. Paradoxically, this attitude and help can lead you into the fullness of living in your own life and enrich your sense of living, of dying, and of everything beyond.

**Things to Remember**

* When you are grieving, reaching out to others who are grieving can help you, too.
* Make room for each other’s feelings if you are both in loss.
* People who are grieving need to know they are not alone. Encourage them to reach out to you or others, and also check in with them often.
* Don’t try to fix the other person or the situation. Don’t try to understand their grief logically. Just being with the person who is grieving and being present are often the most important aspects of helping others grieve.
* The “art of presence” often requires few words and is something to practice with everyone in our lives. Just expressing curiosity about what someone is experiencing can be helpful to them.
* There is no room for judgment in helping others grieve—no judgment of others or of self. Tell them they are doing a good job, or acknowledge that whatever they are feeling is valid.
* Practical gestures can be as important as words and are often remembered.
* People grieving need to know they are not alone, even though they will tend toward isolation. Be a loving presence with them, or by being in the next room or at the other end of the phone.
* Attunement is part of helping others grieve. Trust your own intuition about them and what they might need at any given moment. Then gently check it out with them.
* There is no comparing pain. Every loss has its own character, pace, and experience. Allow for it with others.
* Be available for anger if a grieving person expresses it in any form. Remind them that anger is part of grief.
* People grieving also need to know that the person who has died was appreciated and is remembered. Feel free to speak about the deceased.
* Beware of ungrounded optimism and platitudes. Allow for sadness and tears.
* Be available for moments of joy, as well as gallows humor, at unexpected times.
* Give them this book.

1. http://www.nytimes.com/2014/01/21/opinion/brooks-the-art-of-presence.html?\_r=0 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. ibid [↑](#footnote-ref-3)