

## Courageous Compassion: Grieving as a Community

**Know your role.** When we know someone who has a tragedy or a loss, our basic human compassion inspires feelings that we should reach out and connect with them. The biggest reason we sometimes ignore these thoughts is fear. We are afraid that we won't be able to find the perfect words or do just the right thing to help them feel better. The expectation that we need to make them feel better is something we need to just toss out. Some things in life are of such magnitude that they can't be fixed. They can only be carried. Our role is to make sure someone isn't carrying it alone. That's it.

SUGAR is an acronym that can help us remember some things to say and do that can support someone who is grieving.

**S** – I'm sorry. These words may sound small and insignificant for such a big heartache, but they are among the most honest and most genuine things you can say.

**U** – Be understanding. A close loss is processed in our brains as a trauma. We may be forgetful. We may make plans and then cancel at the last minute. We may be talking to someone, and our thoughts are a million miles away. Keep trying to reach out anyway, and don't take any of this personally. We are trying to re-discover who we are and how our new world works, and it takes a tremendous amount of emotional and physical energy to properly grieve, to survive our loss, and eventually, hopefully, do more than just survive. Be patient.

**G** – Be grateful. We all have days where we are frustrated at shoes that can't be found right as we walk out the door. We all get frustrated at traffic or the weather. Just be mindful of venting about these things around someone who has just had a very recent loss. Death has a way of clearing out all of the extraneous junk and stripping life down to its bare bones. A grieving parent would give anything to be fighting with their child over where their other shoe is or whether they've brushed their teeth. It's okay to vent over life's little frustrations. Just remember that they are little in the grand scheme of things. One of the greatest things you can do to honor my loved one is to appreciate yours a little more.

**A** – Be available. Let the grieving know that you are there for them. Don't ask them to call if they need anything. They won't. Think about your talents and strengths and what you can do to help support them. Then make a specific offer of help. Some examples are gift cards for restaurants or grocery stores, little notes to let them know you are thinking of them, or flowers. Cleaning, yardwork, running errands, or babysitting can all be helpful. A quick text that says "I'm thinking of you" can convey caring.

**R** – Remember. Once we've lost a child or a spouse, our worst fear is no longer losing them. It's that they will be forgotten. Don't be afraid to talk about the person who is gone. I am thinking about my daughter every hour of every day, whether you say anything or not. When someone is brave enough to ask me about her, I feel such a sense of relief because someone else remembers this amazing, wonderful, kind, and beautiful girl that is such a huge part of who I am.

Finally, when it comes to children and grief, **let them lead**. Death is a very abstract and hard-to-process event for children. If they aren't talking about it, don't push the subject. On the other hand, when they bring it up on their own, be open to listening and helping them sort through what they are feeling and thinking. Be open with your grief so they know it's okay. Children are naturally good at being in tune with their own emotions, and don't yet feel pressured by society to feel or respond a certain way. Let them guide the process. In some ways, they are much better at it than we are as adults.