

**Being Helpful in Loss: A preliminary research report**  
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“When a loved one dies, what support do people find helpful?”

As a hospital chaplain, that’s a question I ask myself often. And others ask me as well. We want to get it right. We don’t want to mess things up.

I’ve been offering (and receiving) support after the death of loved ones for nearly seven years as a chaplain, twenty years as a clergy member, decades as a human. But I wanted to go beyond my experience and practices to actually ask people about their experience. What do people find helpful?

In August, 2022, I created a survey with four core questions: what they found helpful in 1) what people said or 2) did or 3) gave in grief support materials, and 4) what people wish someone had said or done. I asked for demographics about their loved one and about them.

I made the survey public to readers of my writings, and it was shared by others (notably Dr Lee Warren).

I ended up with 155 full and partial survey responses.

1. Respondents were between 25 and 94, with the biggest cluster in their 60s. They had lost parents (42.5%), spouses (12.5%), children (12.5%), siblings (10%), friends (7.5%), grandparents (6.3%), and others (other family members, family friends)
  - The people who died were from 16 weeks gestation (stillborn) to 105.
  - The deaths happened from 1974 to the summer of 2022.
  - Most respondents are from the US and most identify as white.
  - A majority of respondents are women (70%), followed by men (21%) and people who didn’t indicate (8%).

I’ve analyzed the responses and have these observations.

1. Acknowledge that you know. It may be a text, a phone call, a visit.
2. Rather than looking for the formula of the right thing to do, think about the person. Because personalities are different, even about grief. Circles of support are different. Relationships between survivors and to the loved one are different. Even a few minutes of reflection will help you know what could be helpful.
3. And then do something.
4. Don’t depend on “experts”. People most remember what people they know do and say.

5. As you are thinking of what to do, consider the following (drawn from eleven clusters of response in the research)
  - a. Tell stories about the person or ask for stories about the person
  - b. Be present (but not smothering) and let them know you care (in ways that they will hear as caring)
  - c. Listen without offering answers or advice or comparisons. And be willing to be silent.
  - d. Offer support in the weeks and months after the service.
  - e. If they want spiritual care, provide it. But think before you use platitudes.
  - f. Know that some people may be doing okay, all things considered.
  - g. Acknowledge that this is hard, that grief is real, that there isn't comparative loss.
  - h. Provide orientation for next steps, if you are knowledgeable.
  - i. Identify specific things you are going to do, and then ask before you do it. (bringing food, mowing the lawn, preparing the house for company.)
  - j. If asked, do it. If asked not to, don't.

Next steps:

1. Run a second survey that assesses what specific actions are most and least helpful. For example, does everyone want flowers? Does everyone like hugs? Does anyone want to know that "God's got this?"
2. Write more extensively and specifically about what is helpful.
3. Evaluate the role of individual differences in discerning what's most helpful.
4. Research generational differences.

For more on this project, visit [beinghelpfulinloss.com](http://beinghelpfulinloss.com)