

Thirty-one things to say and do to help someone when their loved one has died (other than sending flowers.)

Jon Swanson



“Let’s send flowers.” That’s often the default when someone’s loved one dies. But some people are allergic to flowers. And who knows what to do with flower arrangements when you all flew in for the funeral.

I wanted to know what really helps. So I asked people what they wished people had said or done.

I got lots of answers. And stories of hurt.

I also learned that while everyone wants the loss to be noticed, not everyone finds the same things helpful. Start with what you know about your friend and your relationship and their relationship with the loved one.

And then do something.

Here are thirty-one suggestions people in grief wished someone had done.

1. Ask me to tell stories about my loved one.
2. Bring food for the next day or two.
3. Call or text when you find out about the loss.
4. Bring food for later.
5. Care for the outside of my house proactively (mow lawn, shovel walk, rake leaves).
6. Send me a card.
7. Tell me stories about my loved one.
8. Tell me that I made good choices about care for my loved one.
9. Send a card on the anniversary of the loss. (Could be a week, a month, or a year later.)

10. Give me space.
11. Give me a list of helpful grief resources.
12. Come and clean my house before family comes for the funeral.
13. Acknowledge that “this is hard”.
14. Tell me that I don’t need to be strong.
15. Ask me if I want a prayer (rather than just doing it).
16. Give me a trusted book.
17. Help me think about counseling resources for my kids.
18. Give money to the memorial I designate.
19. Sit quietly with me.
20. Call or text 2-3 weeks after the funeral.
21. Attend the funeral or memorial service.
22. Be with me without making me talk about my grief.
23. Attend the visitation before the funeral or memorial service.
24. Tell me that the grieving process was going to take time.
25. Give me a hug.
26. Ask me how I’m doing.
27. Say to me, “I’m sorry for your loss”.
28. Send me a note of remembering on anniversaries (weeks or months).
29. Talk by name about my loved one.
30. Take me to lunch.
31. Tell me it’s okay to feel a little bit relieved. (Especially when the illness has been long and the care has been difficult.)

Dr. Jon Swanson is a writer, hospital chaplain, researcher, and teacher who helps people find sense at urgent and important times. His book, [*“This is Hard”: What I Say When Loved Ones Die*](#), is available on Amazon. This post and other research on being helpful in loss is available at thisishard.substack.com.