

Being helpful in loss: Tell me about your loved one

Dr. Jon Swanson

Sometimes people want to talk about their loved one. It helps them make sense of the life and the loss. And they don't always need a counselor. Often, you can listen as a friend, as a person willing to let someone else tell the stories that help them remember their loved one.

Making space for stories looks like this: *One person telling a story about the person or the event, and the other person simply receiving the story, without interrupting, explaining, defending, or responding with their own story.*

This short guide can help you help them.

NOTE: Sometimes people want to hear stories from others about their loved one. Sometimes they want to talk about what led up to the death. You can create space for those stories as well. This guide is for them to talk about their loved one.

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If you already know what to do, do that.

Seriously. If you are present and offering support and providing a meal and shoveling their driveway and leaving them space, you may be doing exactly what is most helpful. Well done.

Ask an open-ended question.

The goal is to ask a question where the answer allows them to talk as much as they need to about something other than how they are feeling.

- Tell me about your mom.
- What was the scariest thing your grandma ever did?
- What kind of a cook was your sister?
- When were you proudest of your son?
- Tell me about your friend.
- You said that your dad had a great sense of humor. Was he a joke person or story person or a person who laughed at the stories of others?

- How long have you been together? How did you meet? I don't remember exactly.

Be quiet and listen

- Don't flinch.
- Let them have the floor. Don't feel the need to fill silence or fill in words or details.
- Let them express emotion. If they start crying, wait quietly without saying, "don't cry." (If you say that, I will find you.)
- As appropriate, say things like, "That's hard." "She sounds sweet." "I hadn't known that." But let them keep the story going.
- If they apologize for talking so much, tell them that it's a privilege to be with them.

When the stories slow down, thank them for helping you meet their loved one.

Be careful.

- Don't push. Some people actually don't need to talk right now.
- Don't tell your story. This is not about who has the saddest story.
- Don't fill the silence. Stories need space and safety to be told.
- Don't try to find a moral to the stories.
- Don't treat storytelling as something to check off on the grief to-do list. Instead, it's an ongoing remembering of a loved one in all the ways they were part of daily life. So repeat this list as needed.

Thanks for caring for your friend. What feels simple, like listening to their stories, is often essential to making sense of this loss. It may be more important than it feels.

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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.

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