

Responding to Bereaved Students

How not to be an AHat or “How to be an Asset!”**

“What you should and should not do to support a grieving friend”
(Written by a Willamette University student and used by permission)

The Dos

- DO show compassion and empathy. Sharing your emotions, verbally or just through actions and facial expressions can do a lot to reassure a person that you haven't forgotten them
- DO learn how to read subtext. A person may not necessarily be comfortable asking for help directly, and so will drop hints about what they want. It is important to pick up these hints to ultimately determine what the person, and it's okay to ask (especially while learning) the person if you've picked up the right subtext by saying something like “Is this what you meant?”
- DO talk to the person directly and in person. Face to face conversations have so much more value than a text message
- DO talk to the person when they're upset. Asking something such as, “Is there anything you want for me to do *at this moment?*” can go a long way over silence.
- DO ask for direction when you're not sure. If a person is crying and you're not sure if you should be there, ASK. It makes the person aware that you've observed them and that even though you're unsure of what to do, you're willing to find out what THEY want.
- DO want to be there for the person in grief. LET them know that they can always come to you and that you WANT to be there. Sometimes being blunt is better than just having it implied.
- DO understand that a person in grief can be contradictory. They do not necessarily know what they want and their emotions are in a turmoil and that they're constantly changing
- DO be blunt about your emotions. It shows that you CAN feel and reassures the person (HINT-this is subtext in the first DO bullet point).
- DO be sincere with your emotions. A person can tell when you're not being sincere, and that lack of sincerity hurts a person emotionally and will lead to a lack of trust ultimately.
- DO try and understand the magnitude of the loss. The grieving person has lost more than just a loved one. They have lost an entire future. They have lost what was once there, silly and trivial things which may not be significant to you could be very important to that person, on a much deeper level to which you can relate. TRY to understand the importance of these things to that person, but DO NOT try to replace them.
- Do *hear* what the grieving person has to say. There is a difference between listening and hearing. Listening is the act of using your ears to take in information. Hearing is taking to heart what the person has to say and ultimately trying to help.
- DO talk to the grieving person about the person they've lost. The griever loves the person they've lost and asking about them shows an interest in not only the deceased but shows that you care about the person in grief. Talking about the deceased allows the griever a chance to fondly remember the person they've lost and keep those memories and that love alive.

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The Do Nots

- Do NOT be sarcastic. You do not realize what the person is going through. Treating the person's feelings or situation with sarcasm will come across as you not caring about them.
- Do NOT hug or touch an upset person if YOU are not comfortable doing so. The upset person CAN tell if you're uncomfortable which then makes them uncomfortable, making them feel guilty for being upset in the first place.
- DO NOT ignore the problem. If you never talk about the problem or problems it makes the person feel as if you've forgotten them and their struggles. In turn, they don't want to burden you with their struggles and will never speak up, thus taking on the burden(s) alone.
- DO NOT state anything about the person's emotional state. Things like, "Oh you seem to be doing so well." or "I know it will be a long time before you'll actually be okay." come across in a very negative way. It shows that you're not very observant (with the former statement), assuming that one day the person will just wake up and be 'over' this and okay with everything, and that what they're feeling right now is not 'normal' because they're not 'okay.'
- Do NOT assume that you know what the person is going through. Saying things such as, "I get it. I know what you're going through." is fucking insensitive. You do not know the MAGNITUDE or DEPTH of pain that a grieving person is going through, especially when it is an immediate family member.
- Do NOT ask the grieving person, "Well what do you want?" The natural response is the impossible, I want my loved one not to be dead.
- Do NOT verbally center a conversation around you. It makes you come across as if you only care about yourself and that you do not care about the grieving person.
- Do NOT ever assume that the grieving person will just "get over" or "get through" their grief, or their struggles that have been brought upon them because of the death of their loved one. This assumes that there's another side where one day everything will be fine.
- Do NOT have specific expectations for a grieving person. Just because they don't cry does not mean that they're not grieving and that they're actually 'okay.' EVERYONE has a different grieving process and it's essential to understand and respect the specific processes of each individual.

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