

When a Friend is Grieving

Written by L.A. Plume
Monday, 13 June 2016 13:18



Questions recently have gone like this:

Dear L. A. Plume,

My friend's father died, or my friend's daughter died, or my friend's husband was diagnosed with . . . What can/should I do? What do I wear? What is appropriate?

Grief. It's something that we all have to deal with at various stages of our lives. When it happens to us, we are swept away with it and mostly all we can do is react until enough time has passed that we can breathe normally again. But the questions arise when our friends are grieving; how can we help them? Our natural instinct is to reach for that ten-foot pole and place it squarely between us and any situation that requires us to respond to someone's grief. Be it a death, a diagnosis, a divorce, or some other form of tragedy, we are squeamish, and we are on some level grateful it is not our own situation, and most of us find it very difficult to sit still and acknowledge someone's pain.

We know that it is acceptable to send flowers, take food, send a card or note, and those things are all well and good, but then the question is, when? Usually when we get the news, we dispatch the flowers or cards, take the dinner, and consider our duty done. But grieving takes time; if we've lost someone, they will never be back, so next week and next month, we are still without our person and it seems that everyone's lives are still going on uninterrupted while we are reaching for the phone to call someone who isn't there. Thoughts like "I must remind Daddy . . . I can't wait to tell Momma . . . Wouldn't Aunt Betty get a kick out of this?" go through our minds when we hit a trigger, and the single, most seemingly innocent thing can bring us to our knees.

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If you're not sure of what to do or when, do the most you can think of, not the least. Call, send cards, take food . . . not once but often. Take a book, write a memory to share, bake cookies, send a plant that will grow and be a reminder of your care. Flowers are traditional and lovely but I, personally, am not a fan of cut flowers for sad occasions because they wilt and die and remind me of the other loss. Send a check to a charity that will help someone else, offer to help with a project, be there for your friends, be present. And make sure you are there the week after, the month after; acknowledge the anniversary.

When we have lost a person we love, we want to keep the memories, so offer to help organize that box of photographs. If someone loves their garden, spend a few hours with them in it weeding or planting or find a solar light, or planter, or unusual plant for them. Do the best you can.

If you're the grieving person, be generous with your friends' attempts at consoling you; you never know what they are dealing with and what memories your sadness stirs up in them. People are unsure, they may not have known your father, your brother, your child; they may not know what to say, or they may be waiting until they think you will need them after everyone else has gone home.

Be kind, be patient, be thoughtful.

L.A.Plume