

The Etiquette of Illness and Grief – Tip Sheet

“When we suffer loss or face difficulties of any kind, there is a real desire deep in most people for human connection.” Sheryl Sandberg, *Option B*

Do you know someone who is living with a life-threatening illness or grieving the death of a loved one? Have you ever felt tongue-tied about what to say, how to behave, or what to do to support them? Following are some tips about how to support in a spirit of compassion, kindness and care:

- When deciding what to say or do, consider the nature of your relationship with the person (family, deep friendship or acquaintance), cultural/family norms, and your self-knowledge (personality, economic ability, time limits, etc.). Even a small, timely gesture of care can be comforting.
- It is the role of the well person to make the first contact; don't wait too long to call, email, text or write a card. Think about what you like about the person and name the quality(ies) in the message. Don't necessarily expect to receive a response.
- Offer acts of kindness within the nature of your relationship that might include bringing meals, shopping for groceries, household chores, taking care of pets, taking children for outings, babysitting, rides to appointments, social outings, thoughtful gifts, etc. Make the offer light, clear and easy to access.
- If the person shares tumultuous emotions with you like anger, sadness, grief, and fear, remain quiet and listen with compassion and kindness. The feelings need expression and it's a privilege to be trusted with them.

Helpful Things to Say:

I don't know what to say but I just had to call you.
Just thinking of you; feel free to call back if you wish – no pressure.
How is your day going today?
I'm so sorry this is happening to you.
I keep remembering the time we ...
I look forward to being with you again.
It's not fair.
Is it OK if I text from time to time?
Say nothing ... offer listening presence & hug.

Unhelpful Things to Say:

You've got to be strong.
You've got to get [that treatment].
You must stop crying, it's time to move on.
S/he lived such a long life.
S/he is in a better place.
S/he would not want you to be sad.
There is a reason for everything.
It's part of a bigger plan.
I know exactly how you feel.

For further information or to access spiritual care or bereavement support, contact:



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