

Your Personal Coach

By
Kathleen Brehony, Ph.D.

Dear Kathleen,

My best friend's husband of thirty years died about a year ago but she is still having a hard time getting over it. I want to help her move ahead but I'm not sure what I should do to help her. Can you give me some suggestions?

-- Concerned Friend

Dear Friend,

Your best friend is fortunate to have someone who cares about her during her journey of grief and it is compassionate to want to help her. But, it is extremely important to respect that everyone grieves in his or her own time and that this process cannot, should not, be rushed.

Psychiatrist Elisabeth Kübler-Ross has written eloquently about death, dying, and grief and her work offers a great deal of wisdom. She is best known for her description of the stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. But she was very careful to point out that these stages of grief do not occur in a predictable, orderly way – one giving way to the next stage. People can go back and forth, one day accepting their loss and the next feeling depressed. No two people will grieve in exactly the same way and that, while there are no hard and fast rules about the time it takes to fully grieve, we should expect that recovery from a major loss will take two years or more.

I highly recommend all of Kübler-Ross' books and those of Stephen Levine to you and your friend. Both these authors have contributed remarkable insights and have a large body of work so I'll not name all their titles here, but check your local library or bookstore and browse through what they've written. I think that you and your friend will find comfort in their words.

Also, check out my book *After the Darkest Hour: How Suffering Begins the Journey to Wisdom*. If you email or call me with your friend's mailing address, I'd be happy to send her a copy.

Now, get a good handle on what's going on with your friend. What is she doing (or not doing) that suggests to you that she is having "a hard time getting over it"? For example, if she cries all the time, is unable to go to work or spend time with her family or friends, and never has a moment of happiness a year after her loss, she may, indeed, be "stuck" in her grieving process. Is she losing or gaining weight? Has she told you she has trouble sleeping or can't get out of bed? Those are symptoms of depression and if that is the case, you might gently suggest that working with a competent therapist who specializes in grieving or a grief support group can be very helpful in working through the pain of her husband's death.

However, if your friend is functioning (that is to say, she goes to work, sometimes has good days, can enjoy time with her friends and family) but occasionally breaks into tears at some trigger or memory then it will help you to realize that this is a normal part of the grieving process. Are her good times increasing and her sad moments decreasing in frequency and intensity? This is the natural course of grief that is being experienced authentically and the ways in which healing manifests.

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Kathleen Brehony
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When your friend is at a low moment, give her a hug. Tell her that you are there for her and want to listen when and if she wants to talk. Avoid saying, “I know how you feel,” unless you’ve suffered the same kind of loss in which case sharing your feelings can help her feel less alone. You can’t make her pain go away but you can accompany her on her journey of healing.

Mostly, make frequent contact and be there for your friend without being a pest. Let her know you care by sending cards or notes. Invite her to participate in activities that you’ve enjoyed together but respect her decisions to join you or not. It can sometimes be a good idea to include her in some new activity that is not highly charged with memories of her husband. But, it is always best to respect her need to make decisions about what she is ready for. Say, “Let’s go to lunch when you feel like it” instead of something like, “It will be good for you to get out. Come to lunch.”

Listening is more important than giving advice and often silence experienced in the presence of a loving friend is a greater healer than words. Don’t worry about saying just the right thing. There is no right thing. Be honest. If you don’t know what to say then simply say, “I don’t know what to say but I love you and am here for you. I want to help you in any way I can.” And, finally, be patient. Grief knows its own time.

In truth, the most important gift we can give those we love is our presence, our full attention, and our compassionate heart. She’s lucky to have a good friend like you.

Send your personal coaching questions to kathleen@fullpotentialliving.com or call 473-4004. Kathleen is a personal and executive coach, clinical psychologist, and writer. (©2006 Kathleen Brehony. All Rights Reserved.) www.fullpotentialliving.com.

Editor’s Note: Kathleen is offering a free lecture open to the public on Thursday, March 9 from 7-9PM at the Film Theatre at Roanoke Island Festival Park in Manteo. The subject is Bitter or Better? Using Life’s Hard Times for Growth. A booksigning will be held following the lecture. Please come!