

Nine Ways to Actually Help a Friend Through Tragedy

Life is suffering. Tragedy awaits us all.

I know from personal experience. Four years ago, my 37-year-old husband was killed in a car accident on a snowy road. Our children, aged 12 to two, were with him but were unharmed.

In the midst of my personal tragedies I found listening to [Dr. Jordan Peterson](#) podcasts very helpful. The following is partly inspired by his advice and partly from my own journey.

When you or someone close to you is facing the worst kind of tragedy, some kind of death (because every bad thing is some kind of death), you want to help. But you think: “There’s nothing I can do!”, and that has some truth in it. But you *can* do these things below.

1) Do not make things worse.

Analyze what you are doing, and saying and if you think you might be making things worse instead of better, stop. Be the sort of person who “keeps their head when all around are losing theirs.”

2) Do not make things worse.

Yes, that is a purposeful repetition. Seriously, if you can’t stop making things worse, go away. Get help for your problem from someone else and then come back and try it again. Do not stay there making things worse out of a sense of obligation. (And this is not a blessing for you to abandon your loved one in their time of need; it’s an injunction to own up and take responsibility for yourself.)

3) Assess how close you are to the tragedy and do not step into more intimate circles than where you belong without an invitation.

If you do not know how close you are to the tragedy, you aren't that close. Everyone can do #1, #2 and #3, and that alone can make you a hero! But only those closest to the tragedy should proceed on to #4.

4) Be physically near.

Be ready to listen. You don't have to talk if you don't want to. Being quietly there is a gift.

5) Put some order to something, even if it is small.

Do the dishes. Make the beds. Scrub something. Clean the windows; not as a way to avoid conversation but as something to do while everyone is reorienting themselves to the new reality. Make some food or tea. Hand the tearful a glass of cold water, because if they're crying they're dehydrated. (Don't ask them if they want water, just put it in their hand.)

6) Do not add to the chaos.

This is a variation on #1 and #2. If you make all the beds but bring a negative, judgmental attitude, it's better that you not make the beds. And make sure the helpful idea really is helpful: Is a clothing drive what the family really needs right now or would that create more chaos?

7) Do not empathize. (Defined here as "feeling the feelings of others.")

You might get emotional seeing your loved one suffer. That's

ok. But do not stir up emotions inside yourself artificially. You can't actually know the feelings of someone else anyway, much less recreate them inside yourself, and doing so only multiplies the misery. It's overrated at best and downright counterproductive at worst. When someone is deeply suffering, that is no time to "feel their feelings" for them; it's the time to act. Having someone objective and not utterly lost to emotion present in a time of great crisis is one of the greatest acts of kindness you can give. (See the book [*Against Empathy* by Paul Bloom](#).)

8) Be as competent as you can be.

You want to make the beds. Don't ask where the sheets are. Just do it. If you don't know where the clean sheets are and can't find them on your own, choose another way to put order in the chaos.

9) Apply the Notebook Triage.

Select a clean, new – preferably attractive – notebook . If the person is capable of writing, *it's best if they write for themselves* so that they feel some agency in their own life. But if they cannot write at the moment, a rational friend can play secretary. Skipping pages in between categories to make room for later additions, give headings to each page like: *Today, Next Week, Next Month, or Immediate, Soon, Later or, Myself, My Family, Others*. Perhaps your categories will be people's names, or perhaps you will have a page just for *Irrational Fears, Rational Fears, Difficult Conversations I Have to Have*, etc. Don't have more than 3-4 categories or it will be too overwhelming.

The point is to get the thoughts out of the head and onto the paper. The recently traumatized may have the hardest time categorizing their concerns. This is where an objective friend can shine. The friend can prompt the hurting person to speak

what they are thinking about as precisely as they can, using questions such as:

What are you thinking right now?

How do you feel right now?

What do you think you should do first?

If they can't answer these things, they might still be in shock and you should put the notebook down, give them a hug or a glass of water, and wait quietly until something comes. This might take a long while. But the writing down of confusing thoughts can have a profound effect on their life and bring order to the chaos of the moment.

Good strength in your struggle.

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