

# The Girlfriends' Guide to What to Expect When Your Girlfriend's Grieving

by Ginny Sparrow

When I was 27 I lost my mother by suicide. Single, living alone with my pooch, my friends became my family, my rock, my shoulder. They were the source of comfort, the source of understanding.

And, the bane of my existence.

In all fairness, it's hard to do things right when a friend is grieving, and easy as pie to do things wrong. Some classically wrong things were: ignoring me, gossiping about me, trying to take my pain away by telling me my guilty feelings were foolish, among others things.

But, truthfully, it was the small things that really hurt.

A friend of mine had just gotten engaged when my mother died. I know she was excited about the upcoming wedding, but she repeatedly bugged me to RSVP about the out-of-town wedding. How could she be so inconsiderate? I chose to ignore her. I mean, how could I make travel decisions? I was lucky to rise from bed.

One friend called to give me her condolences on a Saturday afternoon – and then cut off the conversation to take another call.

Not everybody was inconsiderate. Other friends left cards on my door, or covered for me at work when I was slack, late, or crying in the bathroom. Others called from around the world as soon as they heard. ("Of course I'm up! What's sleep?") To this day I admire their effort and bravery to reach out to me as soon as possible.

Some of the most helpful people weren't close friends at all, but acquaintances who had some experience with grief. They knew not to give advice or say, "I know how you feel." They also knew to say something, for God's sake.

One acquaintance approached me at

a basketball game and said, "I heard about your mother, and I couldn't decide if it was crueler to not say anything, or say 'I'm sorry.' So I'm going to say, 'I'm sorry.'" I'll never forget those words; what an original, thoughtful, sincere thing to say! I think I fell in love with that guy at that moment.

Sometimes it's easier to say things like that to acquaintances. My friends knew my mother, and were survivors of her suicide as well. Perhaps they were too close to the matter to be

helpful.

I now work at a counseling center. Daily, friends of grieving families ask me what they can say to – and do for – their friends. I often give the following tips:

1. Listen and be with your friend with sincerity. You don't need to say much, but show concern with your body language and your expressions. Match their presence. If they are sitting formally in the chair and

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## SPRC Launches Web-Site

In October, the Suicide Prevention Resource Center (SPRC) launched its web-site at [www.sprc.org](http://www.sprc.org). The web-site is "a one-stop source for many important publications and provides an interactive on-line calendar of national and local suicide prevention events," according to SPRC.

"Visitors to [www.sprc.org](http://www.sprc.org) will be able to connect with suicide prevention specialists assigned to their state or territory, post information about suicide prevention events, and register for SPRC regional conferences. The site features easy access to key documents including the National Strategy for Suicide Prevention, the Institute of Medicine Report, and the report of the President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health."

The SPRC is "the nation's first federally-funded suicide prevention resource center. . . . The Center provides technical assistance, training,

and resource materials to strengthen suicide prevention networks throughout the country and advance the National Strategy for Suicide Prevention. The Center is supported by a grant from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and is based at Education Development Center, Inc. (EDC), in Newton, MA. SPRC is a highly collaborative effort between EDC and its partners – the American Association of Suicidology, the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention, the Suicide Prevention Action Network, the Critical Illness and Trauma Foundation, National Alliance for the Mentally Ill, National Hopeline, National Mental Health Association, National Organization of People of Color Against Suicide, National Resource Center for Suicide Prevention and Aftercare, and the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation."

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speaking of the death very matter-of-factly, then that's how they want to deal with it at that moment. Let them do it. Don't touch them; don't get worrisome on them. The message they're sending out is often what they need in return from you. If they fall in your lap crying – well, hold them and cry with them. Be ready to expect anything.

Sincerity doesn't necessarily mean mushy, heartfelt speeches. A friend of mine and I share the ability to always run out of contact-lens solution, so I brought her a bottle to her father's funeral. (She wouldn't have to worry about that, at least.) She laughed so hard she gave herself the hiccups.

2. Don't take away their feelings. If they feel responsible for the suicide, then that's an emotion they need to work through. If you say, "Don't feel that way; you know that's not true," then that's what I call feeling unheard. I think it's more appropriate to say, "I know I don't blame you at all for this tragedy, but if you feel that way, feel it. Get it out. I'll listen to your secrets and keep them confidential."
3. Don't assume your friend is going to get better every day. She may get worse. Surviving is a roller-coaster ride. If she ignores your invitations to do things, keep inviting. Don't give up on her.
4. Speaking of invitations, be careful of planning inappropriate outings. I don't recommend asking a girlfriend to meet for lunch at a mall, or any crowded public place, soon after the funeral. A grieving person often has a difficult time in crowds – especially joyous, loud ones, like shopping malls and concerts. At the movies, any kind of violence or tears can throw a griever for a loop. Keep these things in mind with your invitations.

5. Don't assume a milestone like six months, or even a year, will make her "over it." Keep the special attention coming. A sweet, thoughtful note sent three months after the funeral – when the cards have stopped coming – will be a welcome surprise. Also, try to remember the anniversary of the death; trust that she certainly will. A card or phone call on that day will put you on her list of best friends for life. Anniversaries, birthdays or holidays may still be difficult for her; if you remember these, there's a special place in heaven for you.

I hope these five tips will help you help your friend. We don't learn these skills in school, and our parents often taught us the opposite way to help a griever. (Many believe it's rude to bring up the death 24 hours after the funeral.) If you can send caring thoughts and actions throughout the entire mourning process, that means you really cared to send the very best.

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## GOOD-BYE

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such exotic locales as Los Angeles, Atlanta, Bethesda, and Santa Fe – I met survivors from all around the world. There, we shared our stories, our grief, our recovery. I want to salute those survivors I've spoken with over the years; you've been my inspiration.

I have many people to thank during my four years, so I hope you'll bear with me for a moment. First, I want to thank staff at AAS' home-office – Dr. Lanny Berman, Amy Kulp, and Kamil Barker – for their assistance. I also want to salute the two Survivor Division chairs under whom I served, Stephanie Weber and Mitzi Crawford Spears, for their support. In addition, I want to thank those people who contributed, gratis, their articles and story ideas, especially Editorial Board members Lois Bloom and Michelle Linn Gust and contributor Franklin Cook. I want to thank those Healing Conferences chairs who were supportive and open of my efforts to publicize and write about each conference, including Sam and Lois Bloom; Mary Ann Stark; Gail

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Finally, I leave knowing that the newsletter is in excellent hands. Michelle Linn Gust is the perfect choice to take over this newsletter, and I trust that she'll do an excellent job in the years to come in highlighting survivors' stories and issues. I wish her – and all of you – the best.