



Video Transcript

How to Support Someone in Grief: Holding Space with Compassion & Presence

When you ask questions of somebody who's experiencing grief, make sure you allow space for them to

respond to you. When I approach somebody, I don't have preconceptions,

so I'm not coming in with a narrative or a story. It's okay to just say,

I'm here. to not know the questions to ask, and to just show up because you care to show up.

Hi, this is Dr. Judith Ehrman Shapiro with Gaia Goddess this morning,

and we're talking about witnessing grief and learning to hold space with compassion for others.

Why is it so difficult to navigate grief when we're witnessing other people who are experiencing loss? There are a few reasons. Usually this is somebody that we care about.

And when we care about someone and we see them suffer, we want to do something.

Capital D. We want to take action. And the thing about grief and death is that we have limited

control. There's only so much we can do. So we're starting off in a situation where we're feeling

a

lot of frustration to begin with. The other thing is that we are creatures of empathy and

compassion. Do you know that there are neurons in the brain that are called mirror neurons?

And what that means is that when I see you upset, it's reflected in my brain and I feel upset.

That's why things that happen like when you're watching TV and it's a very dramatic situation

and

you see someone crying or suffering, that you may find yourself crying as well.

Your mirror neurons have been set off. So we are inherently beings who feel emotions very

deeply

and we feel the emotions of other people. A third reason why it's so hard to witness grief in

others, we feel responsible. We may have caretaking responsibilities. There may be someone

that we

feel is very vulnerable, involved like a child or somebody who's older or someone who hasn't

experienced grief before. And in those situations, we have this desire to turn chaos into stability. But again, when it comes to grief and to death, we really have limited control. And so we feel that inside. Very often we're concerned with, will I say the right thing? How will what I'm offering forward be taken or received? And that question alone sometimes holds us back from expressing anything at all. We may find ourselves feeling avoidant. We may find ourselves not feeling good about whatever it is that comes out. So I'm going to offer you 10 very practical tips about ways that you can approach witnessing other people. And the first one is questions. When you ask questions, it means you're not making assumptions at all. You're concerned and you want to know what's going on. So the first thing is please feel free to ask questions. Nobody assumes that you are coming towards the situation with all the answers to begin with. When you ask those questions, make sure that you listen reflectively. So what does it mean to listen reflectively? It means don't plan out your response. And I know that people do this before you hear the answer to the question. Don't worry about how you're going to respond. Say I say, how are you feeling? And the response comes back, I feel so lost. So then I respond by asking a question. So you feel like you're not sure what direction you're going in or you're not sure how you feel. And then the person will come back with clarity. That's exactly what I'm trying to say. Or no, what I mean is that everything just feels so heavy and so dark. And you just continue that path of inquiry until the person is able to find more and more clarity just through your loving presence, your ability to listen, to hear, and to discern, clarify what it is that you're saying. I'm going to go back to the idea is that when I approach somebody, I don't have preconceptions. So I'm not coming in with a narrative or a story. I'm coming in just with the listening. Why do we come in with narratives and stories? It's because we feel anxious or we believe that we know the story before we hear it. Skipping to another point here, it's very important to realize that everybody's path of mourning, grief is unique. I actually have done research. That was part of my dissertation research. And it was amazing. I had 104 participants and found like 100 pathways that I could clearly define. People talk about the stages of grief, but it doesn't mean you go through the stages of grief in order or that you go through all the stages of grief. They're very common, but very rarely do we go through them in any kind of a linear way. We may bounce back and forth through bargaining, depression, anger, and acceptance. We may have acceptance for quite a while and then everything falls apart again and we start all over. So never go in with the assumption that you know what's happening with someone else. Give yourself permission not to know and to ask the question, to hear the response, and then to become clearer. When you ask questions of somebody who's

experiencing grief, make sure you allow space for them to respond to you.
Very often when we're in mourning, we experience what's called brain fog.
And the reason is because there is so much going on in the process of our body.
There's so much adaptation, shock, strong feelings.
Our heads are in the past, in the future. When you ask someone a question,
they may not be able to respond to you right away.
Something that is so kind and so meaningful is to ask the question and allow for space.
And if you see this kind of response, where someone looks up,
focuses on... it's very often because they're searching for the words or they don't know how to
answer the question. And you can even respond by asking for clarification.
You can say, oh, that's a hard question to answer. And they might say,
I'm really searching for the words right now. So your compassionate response.
Allowing time and space means so very much. Prepare yourself for something that we call
oscillation. And that means that people are going to bounce back and forth between contending
with
the tasks of grief, who, what, where, why, when is the memorial,
how do you feel about things, with tasks that are more on the surface.
I haven't washed my hair in days. I haven't smelled the air.
What season is it? Where am I? People may bounce back and forth in their emotional states,
and that's really quite normal. So if you don't see consistency,
it doesn't mean that anything is wrong. It just means that In order to provide the system with
some
relief, the brain changes function or focus. And that's just part of our normal response to grief.
I want to just do one last thing that I call my it's okay.
You ready? It's okay to just say,
I'm here. to not know the questions to ask, and to just show up because you care to show up.
That act is meaningful. It's okay to feel awkward,
to feel clumsy, to regret something that slips out, and to come back and be very transparent
about
that. Did I just say the right thing? Are you okay? It's okay.
It's okay for you to worry about how what you offer will be received.
We all want to do the right thing with our compassionate and loving heart.
So I hope that these ideas help you navigate a little bit as you watch grief in other people.
It's also important to remember to take care of yourself. Seeing grief in others sparks suffering
within ourselves. It may spark memories. It may trigger remembrances.
And that's part of how we're connected to one another, part of how love connects us.
Thank you for being with me during this time, and I'm with you in this journey.
From my heart to yours, this is Dr. Judith Ehrman Shapiro with Gaia Goddess.
We hope you enjoyed this practice with Gaia. And if you did, make sure to heart it above and
explore more suggestions below. Till next time, love,
light, and Gaia.

