

# Family

## GRIEF AND LOSS

# How to help a friend in crisis

**Listen:** The most important thing you can do is provide a supportive presence

Marjorie Clark Brimley for *Washington Post*

Two months after my husband's death, I was standing in my kitchen with my friends. Our young children ran all over the house and we laughed about their antics, but I had a nagging sensation that something was terribly wrong. Finally, I realized that it was dinnertime, right about when my husband usually would have returned home.

My schedule after his death had been so off that it was the first time I was doing something normal — tag-teaming with other moms to watch our kids — and for a moment, I forgot that everything in my life had changed. When I snapped back to reality, I started crying.

What were my friends supposed to do? We had known each other for years, and they had helped me through my husband's short illness and death. But what was life going to be like now? How were we all going to get through this? What could they say to comfort me in that moment?

"All of us are going to experience loss," says Sabrina N'Diaye, a psychotherapist in Baltimore. "People want to feel supported and held and heard, but that doesn't necessarily mean their friends need to take away their problems." In fact, in many complex situations, there isn't going to be any way to alleviate the immediate problem, so the most important thing friends can do is provide a supportive ear.

Kelly Grocoff, a therapist in Ann Arbor, Michigan, agrees. "Grief is an experience where you feel a multitude of emotions, some of which don't make sense, and normalizing them is something that friends can do well," she says. In fact, friends who have surrounded you as you have been raising kids have seen you through many changing emotional states, Grocoff says, and they may be well-equipped to act in an emotionally flexible way.

### DON'T OVERTHINK IT

And knowing exactly what to say isn't the most important part of providing support, says Karen Millsap, a mind-set expert in Orlando. Many people came to her aid when her husband died unexpectedly, leaving her to parent her young child alone, but it was her friend Jamie's daily visits that played a large role in her healing. She and Jamie would do mindless activities together, such as painting their nails or walking around Target, which reminded her that she wasn't alone. When dealing with friends in crisis, Millsap advises people not to overthink it.

Grocoff adds: "Your presence is everything. You don't need the right words, because there are no right words. When big life events happen to those we love, we often feel like our efforts to support them need to be big as well. But showing up and participating in small, concrete daily activities can be a lifeline, a solid, sure reminder that they are not alone."

Some situations may be more complicated than others, and they may require



"Your presence is everything. You don't need the right words, because there are no right words." Staff illustration, Shutterstock images

a parent to find support from people who can more fully understand the situation. For Kristin Holmes, a mother in Washington, D.C., this meant connecting with other parents who were experiencing similar hardship. When her daughter was born four years ago with congenital heart defects, she reached out to other "heart moms" for emotional support.

"When you have a child who has complex medical conditions, there's a language that comes with crisis," says Holmes, whose daughter recently died. "It's beneficial to have a group of people who support you and speak that language. I don't have to explain what things mean, because they all know. I can be completely vulnerable with them, because I don't have to worry about them not understanding."

### STABILITY AND SUPPORT

But even if friends aren't going through the same circumstances, they can provide other support to a family in crisis. Grocoff says that parenting friends may be particularly adept at providing stability and support for children affected by tragedy.

"The people who've known your children for years are likely to be a source of comfort for them, and in many cases, their friends are friends with your kids," she says. Parents are problem-solvers, she adds, and can help with daily stress and logistics for families in crisis.

N'Diaye agrees, noting that parents play

many roles — from cook to driver to story-reader — and those are places where friends can play an active role. N'Diaye also says that for many people experiencing loss — whether from death, illness, job loss, divorce or something else — there is a real need for people to show up well after the acute incident has occurred. In the days immediately after the tragedy, there is usually an outpouring of support. But in the weeks and months that follow, that support often wanes.

Holmes says a continued presence has been critical for her. "The most important thing is having someone with whom I can be vulnerable."

Millsap adds that the friends who provided that sustained support became much closer to her family in the years since her loss. "Now we are completely intertwined in each other's lives," she says.

Maybe more than anything, these friends can remind us of our own identity as parents.

"Sometimes, those going through grief and loss feel like they don't even recognize themselves," Grocoff says. "Connecting to a part of one's identity that still feels largely intact is an important reminder that we are more than just our losses, and we are competent and skilled at living our lives and caring for our children, and despite the unknowns in our lives, there are still parts of ourselves that we can recognize."

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Therapist Kelly Grocoff

## PARENTING Q&A

# Toddler's head-banging is usually nothing to worry about

John Rosemond *Tribune News Service*

**When my 2-year-old gets angry, he sometimes gets down and bangs his head on the floor. This happens two or three times a week, generally speaking. He's not bruised himself yet, but I don't know how long that's going to last. To make matters worse, I've made the mistake of reading about various psychological disorders and have started to obsess about the autism spectrum thing. Other than the head-banging, he's a happy, verbal, and very imaginative child, able to play by himself in his room for several hours at a stretch. I'm blessed and worried at the same time. Can you give me some reassuring words?**

That's not an unreasonable request. Try these: Far as I can tell, you have nothing to worry about. Hold that thought. I'll come back to it in a moment or three.

It's a fascinating fact, human beings are the only species that need — or have recently come to thinking they need — specially trained, highly evolved, superpages like myself to help them navigate the fundamentally simple, non-intellectual process of raising a child to competent adulthood. Since 1970, more than 100,000 books on how to raise children

have hit the market. Around 20 were written by yours truly (with more to come). God help me.

The irony in all of this is the more the experts have published, the more difficult childrearing has become. A good part of the problem has to do with the inherently progressive nature of the publishing business.

### TOO MUCH TO READ

To be published, an author must come up with a new idea, a novel approach, something "fresh." It follows that the more parenting books, articles, columns, and so on a parent reads, the more the parent is bombarded with new ideas and approaches, and the more confused and anxious the parent becomes. Too much information!

To continue ... and the more confused and anxious the parent becomes, the more the parent reads in a never-ending and vain search for the new idea that will end all new ideas. This craziness is why I have a job. Like I said.

Unlike most people of my ilk, however, I am a proponent of the ancient kisaii school of wisdom parenting, kisaii standing for keep-it-simple, as-it-is. In the

raising of a child, the simplest approach (unconditional love and an equal measure of unequivocal leadership) and the simplest explanations rule. You, dear mother, are thinking too much. You are indeed blessed! He entertains himself for hours? That's as clear a sign of good development as any. But, keep in mind, nearly all toddlers are haunted with episodes of kick-out-the-jams insanity.

I flunked Diagnosing Across the Miles 101 in grad school, but I can tell you that 2-year-olds are prone to doing things like banging their heads on the floor when they don't get their way. I might be concerned if he was oblivious to hurting himself, but the absence of bruising and the fact he's still acting normatively in every other respect (he's not acting like a drunk, e.g.) suggests strongly that he knows when to stop.

To bring this chapter in his life to a close, draw a chalk circle on the floor in a side room. Tell him his doctor says he can bang his head all he wants, but only inside the circle. If he starts banging, take him to the circle (drag gently), say, "Bang your head here, my love," and walk away.

This too will pass. I give it two weeks, tops. See how simple that was?



Toddlers are prone to doing things like banging their heads on the floor when they don't get their way. Parents shouldn't overly stress about it. Shutterstock