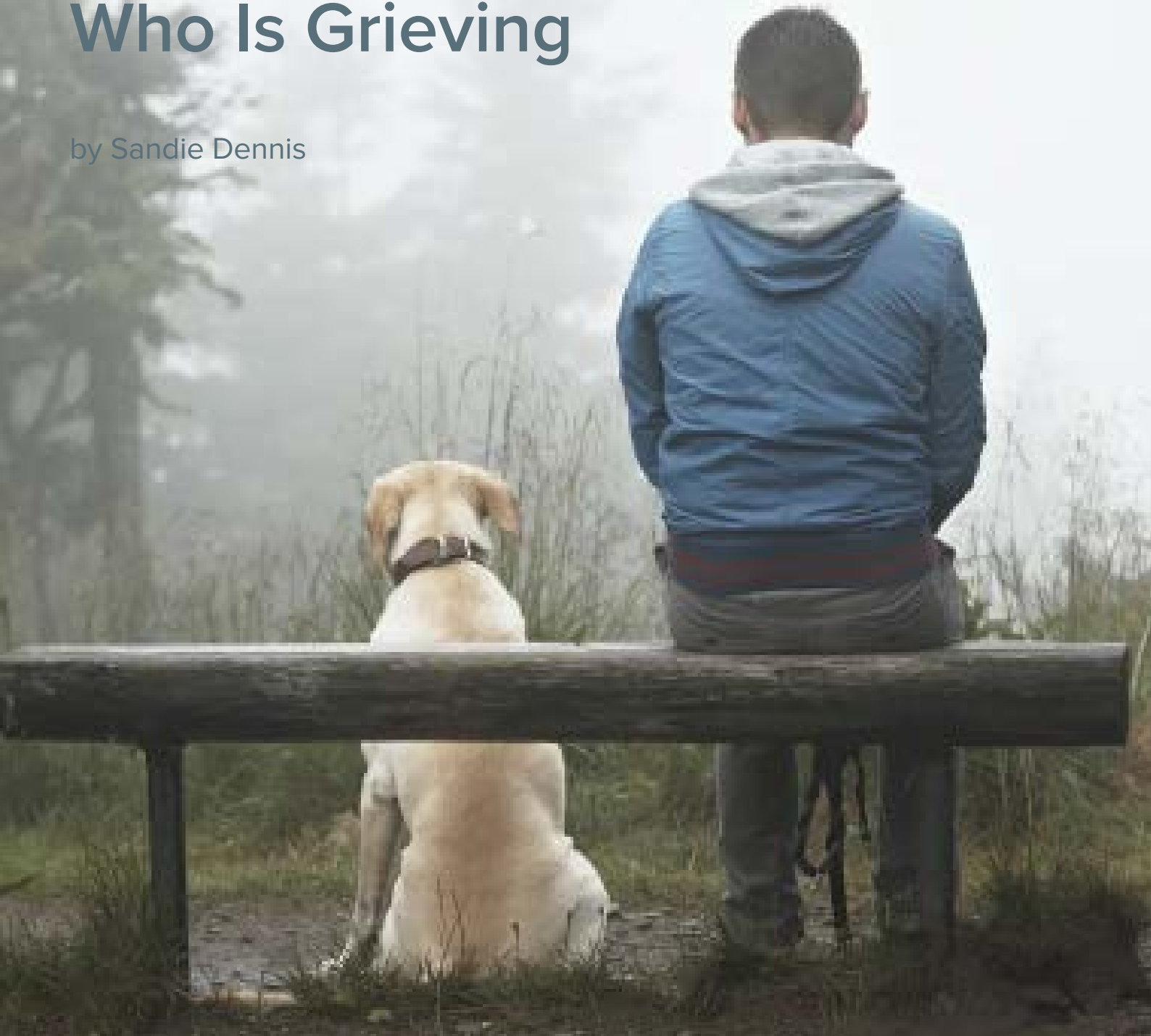


How to Speak to Someone Who Is Grieving

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“I’m so sad to hear this, and I’m here if you need to talk”

When I was seventeen, my best friend’s Mum died from cancer.

Sadly, she had had the illness for a long time, which gave me some space to think about how I would support my friend when she needed me the most.

But when the tragic time finally came, I felt totally unprepared.

It was incredibly uncomfortable. I couldn’t think of anything to say, so I tip-toed around the subject whenever it couldn’t be avoided. But mostly, I kept quiet, for fear of saying the wrong thing.

I was afraid of upsetting someone I cared about so much – what if she cried, and I couldn’t deal with her tears? Fear overwhelmed me, and I felt utterly helpless.

Then, one quiet afternoon in our college’s common room, my usually calm best friend shot out of her chair.

“My mum might be dead,” she exclaimed loudly, “but I want to talk about her, and you all are acting like nothing has happened!”



Little did I know then, how much that moment would change my life.

It transformed the way I approach people experiencing grief; it even led me to create a business that supports such people. Now, when thousands of us are experiencing grief alone all over the world, reaching out to those who are suffering matters more than ever.

Many people will be struggling to deal with their grief, unable to hug a friend, or even attend the funeral.



However, grief is our society's biggest taboo.

It's very likely that you recognise the helpless, overwhelmed feelings I described as a seventeen-year-old girl, because most of us have similar fears about how to deal with somebody else's grief.

So, I want to pass on some suggestions about how I support grieving people on a weekly basis (even before the global pandemic) to help guide you through those terrifying feelings.

Be authentic, be honest

If you've ever experienced any form of grief yourself, then you will know that grieving people have an in-built 'bullshit detector'.

So be honest, and be yourself.

If you don't know what to say, say so. If you are sorry the person has died, and you will miss them, say that.

Explain to the grieving person that you are thinking of them, and that you will help wherever you are needed (though don't offer false hope if this isn't really possible).

Above all else, trust that the care and compassion you feel will come across, even if you can't think of the perfect words to say.

Here are some starting points:

- I don't know what to say, but I am so sorry to hear this news.
- I am so sorry for your loss – you are in my thoughts.
- I'm so sad to hear this, and I'm here if you need to talk.
- He/she was such a wonderful person/so selfless – full of positivity/kindness [whatever feels appropriate] – they will be hugely missed.
- He/she will be missed so much – they were so special.
- I am so very sorry to hear this sad news. I cannot imagine how devastated you are.
- I cannot imagine the hole that she/he will have left.
- I'm so very shocked and saddened by this news. It's hard to believe [name] has gone. I am here to talk whenever you need me.
- This is so heartbreaking – I wish I could be there to give you a hug.



Actions can speak louder than words

Sending a card and flowers, or even a text or voice note (you can practice these, then replay them back a few times before sending) can be very comforting to someone in the throes of grief.

If you can't think of anything to say, you could begin your note with one of the previous starting points.

Only contact a grieving person when you have the time

Be sensitive to the fact that a bereaved person may want to open up and tell you about all the events leading up to the death, several times, in different conversations. They may want to tell you some personal stories, or just cry down the phone.

Whatever they want to say, be patient and listen. Don't be afraid of tears, but gently give them the space to let everything out.

Although it may not feel like it, just being there can sometimes be all that is needed to make a genuine difference.



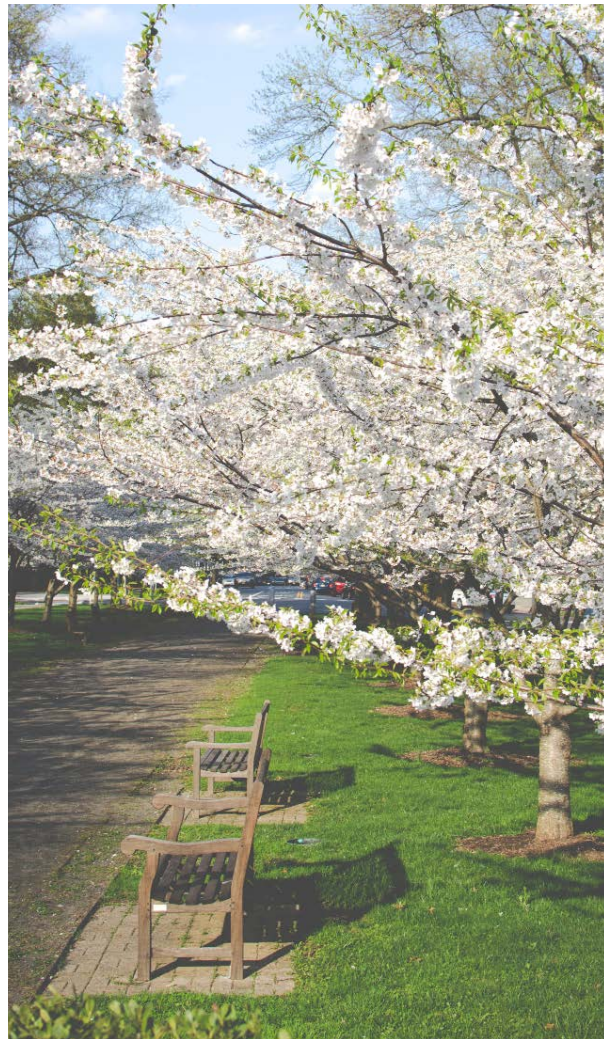
Talk about your memories

Telling your own funny stories and memories of the person who has died can be a real comfort to those who are experiencing grief, helping to create a shared experience of how that person's life touched those around them.

Think of practical ways to help

Offer specific help; say, "I've been wondering if you're able to get food, I'm just popping out to... so I wondered if I can get anything for you".

Grieving people can be so caught up in the isolation of grief, that everyday practicalities are forgotten.



Look after yourself

The aeroplane adage of putting your oxygen mask on before another's also rings true here.

Looking after your own mental wellbeing whilst supporting another's is just as important. It could be that reaching out to a grieving person brings up anxiety and fear for you, so have someone impartial on hand to talk it all through with afterwards.

Be kind to yourself by going for a walk after, or planning your favourite nutritious meal.



Continue to stay in contact

It's so common that as people get on with their lives after a funeral, contact with those who are still grieving dwindles.

However, during these times it is all the more important to stay in touch.

Ask the person if they would prefer a call, a text, or perhaps a video chat over Facetime or Zoom. Whichever they choose, find a quiet, private space to make contact from.

If you have a larger family, you could ask the person if they would like to talk to other family members, too.

If it feels appropriate, invite them to a Zoom quiz or bingo night, or suggest doing an online cooking class together. This will help to make them feel included, with something to look forward to.



Make suggestions

If you have noticed they haven't been for a walk in a few days, maybe suggest for them to go outside.

Mention opening a window, if it's a nice day.

Ask what they are having for lunch or dinner, and make tasty suggestions. You could also recommend something funny or uplifting to watch.

If you feel they are not coping, suggest CRUSE (where I received my grief training) so they can chat in confidence with trained professionals.

Try and build their confidence, by reminding them of the amazing person they are, and all the things they are good at.

Finally... here's what not to do:

- Don't compare anything else to the death they have personally experienced.
- Don't assume how they might be feeling.
- Don't suggest an 'ideal' grieving time: "when my Aunt died it took me a year to get over it."
- Don't make big statements like: "at least they had a long life".





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