



# GRIEF FOR THE STUDENT

## TIME DOESN'T HEAL, BUT IT HELPS...

**Grief.** There is a chance that you will come across it during your studies. A fellow student may lose a loved one or you yourself may have to face the loss of someone you know.

Grief is a normal response to a significant loss, such as the death of a friend, family member or fellow student. It can have a long and far-reaching impact on all aspects of life, including your studies. You carry your sorrow with you, even when you come to the university.

One of the biggest misconceptions about grief is that you will have to go through certain stages before returning to life as before. This is not the case. Grief is like a pendulum, where moments of sorrow alternate with moments of recovery. The speed at which the pendulum swings differs from one person to another. Know that each of us has an important and supportive role to play in helping someone close to us through the grieving process.

How exactly do you play it? What would be a good way to express your sympathy and lend someone your support? What should you say, and what shouldn't you? And what should you consider if you are the one who is grieving? To help you on your way, we have set out a few tips below.

## WHAT IF SOMEONE CLOSE TO YOU IS GRIEVING?

- Let them know that you are there, and offer practical help**  
There are several ways to show your sympathy and support. Send a message to say that you are thinking about them. Choose a quiet time to start up a conversation or make a small gesture such as helping out with a study task or passing on some lecture notes. Let them know that you are available to offer a listening ear or a shoulder to cry on, but also let it be known that you are happy to be there without anything being said.  
  
Try to keep in step with the grieving person, but don't be afraid to suggest something that might be fun. Don't say 'just call me any time' or 'if there's anything you need', because no one feels up to that when they are grief stricken. Make the call yourself, go knock on their door or send a message. It is best to suggest something specific, like 'do you feel like taking a little walk?'. Suggest things that you can actually deliver on, like 'shall I bring you some soup over, later?' When people are grieving they are sometimes too wrapped up in their emotions to ask for help.
- Give the grieving person time**  
Grief is a long, drawn-out process, and one that everyone goes through in their own way. Do not congratulate a grieving student if their sadness appears briefly to have lifted. Many people feel desperately guilty in that moment and would certainly not appreciate having it pointed out to them. You can say that you are happy to see them back, and this in itself can be very encouraging without implying that the grieving process is over. Remind yourself to check how things are by putting a note in your diary several weeks or months ahead. Every grieving person has occasions when it all wells up again, such as a birthday, or a holiday. Show understanding in these difficult times. Loss fades, but it never 'goes away'. Be patient.
- Most importantly, don't do nothing**  
It can sometimes be difficult, as a fellow student or friend, to find the right words or get a sense of what the person might need. But don't let that prevent you from saying or doing anything. Even if you sound awkward or self-conscious, they will appreciate your support and sympathy more than inaction. If you don't know what to say, then just say that you don't know what to say. Don't be afraid to open old wounds or spoil a happy moment. Remain open to genuine conversation. Displaying your engagement is just as important as uttering the right words.
- Steer clear of clichés**  
Loss and grief are difficult to talk about. So difficult, in fact, that we would often rather remove ourselves from the situation, or, instead, we resort to well-meaning but pointless platitudes. 'Ancient wisdom' we sometimes call it, but thought-killing cliché is another description for it. Things like 'time heals the scars', 'you'll get through it', or 'life goes on'. Such comments are stand-off-ish, because what you're actually saying is: 'Hurry up! 'Get better soon!', and, by doing that, you are denying the person's grief. Try not to give advice or talk about your own experiences, unless the person asks you to. The most important thing is to listen and to show that you are there.

## WHAT IF YOU ARE GRIEVING?

- Give yourself permission to grieve**  
Be kind to yourself, and accept that it will be a while before you get back to 100%. Grieving takes up a lot of energy and it is hard work, which takes a toll on your mind and body. It can make an ordinary day quite intense. Make sure you get enough rest, and don't feel guilty if you can't handle those 'ordinary' tasks. It is only normal to worry about falling behind for the exams or missing a deadline. It may help to seek support from a study guide, for example, and assess together the priorities and see what can be placed on hold for a while.
- Decide whether or not you are comfortable to talk about your loss**  
Do you like it when your fellow students/friends ask how you are? Or is the loss still too painful to talk about? Give your fellow students/friends the 'heads up' on how you feel about this. It will give them the chance to consider your needs.
- Don't be afraid to ask for help**  
It is not always easy for the people around you to see exactly what you need. Do you need a good talk, or some help (with studying, for example, or with a task)? Tell your fellow students/friends or talk about it with someone from one of our student services (see further).
- Take your time**  
Getting back to daily life is a process. Things go well some days, and you are ready to take on the world. Then you relapse the next day and things go badly. That is entirely normal, and a part of the grieving process. Don't put yourself under too much pressure, and make time for yourself when you need it. It is important to readjust your study schedule to suit your needs. Prioritise your own well-being.

VUB initiatives on grief and loss can be found at this website: [Compassionate University | Vrije Universiteit Brussel \(vub.be\)](https://www.vub.be/onderzoek/onderzoeksgroep-voor-rouw). For example, VUB holds an annual remembrance service at the monument of trust or comfort. You can find support at the 'Monument of Comfort' on Etterbeek campus, a spot where you can always take time out for yourself.

## WOULD YOU LIKE SOME EXTRA SUPPORT?

If grief and loss have left you facing a brick wall in your studies, and you would like to speak to someone at VUB about it, get in touch with the study guides: <https://student.vub.be/studiebegeleiding/#begeleiding-en-ondersteuning>.

If you would like support through your grief and loss, get in touch with CAW (<https://www.caw.be>). You can also see a psychologist on campus, through [Brucc@vub.be](mailto:Brucc@vub.be), or find one in the neighbourhood: [Find a psychologist | VVKP](#).

You also have free and anonymous access to Tele-Onthaal (106 or at [www.teleonthaal.be](http://www.teleonthaal.be)) and the suicide line (1813, or [www.zelfmoord1813.be](http://www.zelfmoord1813.be)) where you can ask any questions you may have about suicidal thoughts or if you have lost a loved one after a suicide.

## SPECIFIC DOS AND DON'TS

### HOW CAN YOU HELP? WHAT YOU CAN DO OR SAY.

There is absolutely nothing wrong with asking regularly how the person is, or more specifically, how they are today. If you tell someone that you are there for them, then do take the trouble to contact them and ask how they are right now. Do the same again after a few months, because it is important to acknowledge that this is a long term process.	Give the grieving person the time to express their feelings, whether this is anger or sadness. The important thing is just to be there. Show that you can see the grieving person's sadness.
Show them regularly that you are there for them. For example, say: 'If ever you feel the need, you can always come for a chat, a shoulder to cry on or just to have some fun'. Supporting someone in their grief means moving at their pace. Sometimes they may want to talk about it, sometimes not, and that's okay.	Offer practical help for a grieving person, such as passing on lecture notes, helping with an assignment, going to lectures together or attending an online class.
Grieving is a personal thing, so do not make any assumptions but keep listening with an open mind and without judgement.	Ask what the grieving person needs, and then follow up on their needs. If it seems possible, you can always suggest things like going for a walk, going to watch a movie, bringing some food over, and so on.
If you do not know what to say, then just say that you do not know what to say, or say 'I feel really awkward about this, but would you like to talk about it?'. Then at least you are acknowledging the person's grief.	
Do not say: 'If there's anything you need, just let me know.' But: 'I'm going shopping, is there anything I can get you?'	'I would happily cook you a meal, what sort of thing do you like?'
Do not say: 'Are you feeling better now?' But: 'How are you doing today?'	'Are you managing okay?'
Do not say: 'Give me a call!' But: 'If it's okay with you, I'll give you a call every night at 8 PM.'	'I heard that X passed away, that must have been terrible for you. I would like to be there for you.'
Do not say: 'I can imagine that...' But: 'I just don't know what to say'	'I'm here for you, and if there's anything practical I can do, I will.'
Do not say: 'Tell me some more about your father/brother/...' But: 'How is your father doing now?' This opens a conversation.	Get together with your friends to set up an online chatgroup, for example, to work out how you can be of help.