

**The Six Honorings**  
**&**  
**The Do's & Don'ts of Grief Support**  
**by Ken Druck, Ph.D.**

Losing a loved one changes you forever. I know this personally from having lost my older daughter, Jenna, when she was only 21 years old. You're different now, as Barbara Kingsolver so eloquently puts it, "You don't think you'll live past it, and you don't, really. The person you were is gone."

So how do those of us who lost a loved one on 9-11 live on? How do we keep from letting our sorrow and despair become the central organizing principles of our lives after 20 years? And, for those who rise up to be there for family members, friends, neighbors and fellow citizens who are at the epicenter of 9-11, what are some of the *Do's and Don'ts of Supporting Someone Who is Grieving?*

To answer the first of these questions, I created in the years following the death of my daughter called *The Six Honoring's* that I've had the honor of sharing with families who lost loved ones in tragedies including Columbine, Sandy Hook, Boston, Las Vegas and, most recently, COVID-19.. Each honoring is a guideline for how to live out the rest of our own lives, heal our shattered hearts and honor/remember the person we've lost.

*The First Honoring: Your Own Survival*

The first way we honor the loss of a loved one is to fight our way back into life. We allow ourselves the inescapable sorrow, confusion, and heartaches that come with losing someone we love. And we come to understand that grieving is as natural and normal as bleeding when we're cut. We learned to *walk with a limp in our hearts*. Putting best practices for self-care and healthy grieving into play allows us to learn how we are going to survive their death. Healing a shattered

heart, we discover, may require a measure of self-care and compassion we have never had to call upon. Summoning newfound faith, strength, courage and clarity, we begin to understand exactly what it's going to take for us to survive in the days, weeks, months, years, and decades to come.

*The Second Honoring: Do something good in their name*

By doing something as simple and elegant as lighting a candle or planting a tree, or as elaborate as conducting a celebration of their life or starting a non-profit organization, we show the world who they were, that they lived, and that they live on through the good that will be done in their name. The words and deeds of loving husbands, wives, children, parents, friends and co-workers who have lost a loved one after 9-11 are on daily display across America. These honoring's along with demonstrations of gratitude for our first responders, police and firefighters, and health-care workers by those who have suffered losses help us turn our deepest sorrows back into love and gratitude. As an example, one bereaved wife in New York is honoring her fallen 42-year-old husband from COVID – 19 by speaking out about how we can mobilize greater resources and save more lives.

*The Third Honoring: Cultivate a spiritual relationship with your loved one*

We used to be able to stop over for a quick visit, meet for lunch or pick up the phone and hear their voice. Coming to terms with the fact that we aren't going to see or hear them again brings deep sorrow. And yet, our love for them lives on, perhaps stronger than ever and we learn about *the love that never dies*. How and where to express this undying love leads us to the Third Honoring, cultivating a "spiritual relationship" with them. Do I know with 100% certainty the true nature of life and death, or what happens when we die? Or whether there's a "spiritual realm" in which we can communicate with those who have died? Of course not. But that's where faith comes in. Giving ourselves permission to hold in faith what gives us some degree of comfort, and continue to express

our love, helps us go on. It may have been years since I picked up the phone, called my mother and asked, "So how's my favorite mother?" but when I think about my mom, or picture her smile, I will sometimes ask out loud, "So, how's my favorite mother?" Affirming *the love that never dies*, allowing ourselves to express our love in a spiritual way can be another form of honoring.

*The Fourth Honoring: Embody a special quality of theirs*

Whether it's their kindness, sense of humor, fierce determination, loyalty or even their irreverence, choose a very special aspect of their personality and begin to embody it. We may declare, "I'm going to be a kinder person. My son's kindness will live on in me" Or decide that "being lighter-hearted and less intense, like my Dad, is going to help me become the better version of myself."

*The Fifth Honoring: Write new chapters of life*

This honoring is perhaps the most challenging: to the best of our ability, we try to begin living out the rest of our own lives. But this is not always easy. Going on without them when they've been such an important part of our lives, and feeling like we're leaving them behind, can be excruciatingly painful and difficult. Some of us find ourselves in *The Torture Chamber of Guilt*, obsessing over what could or should have done, or whether we could have done something to save them. We replay every scene in our minds, trying to undo what cannot be undone and working ourselves into a state of guilt and despair.

Trying to make sense of the fact that their life has ended (while ours continues), why the "Casting Director" took them (and not us) and whether we have a right to experience pleasure, comfort, or even the simplest joy (when they cannot), can prevent us from moving forward. Trying to make sense of things that are probably never going to make sense, our hearts grow heavy.

It takes great courage and a willingness to begin writing new chapters of life, making new memories, for us to go on. Reminding ourselves we were a good son or daughter, mother or father, friend or family member; of all the good times and things that went well, of the blessings we brought into their lives; of the love and care we gave them; and the joyful times we shared together, we begin to count the blessings of having been in each other's lives. Our hearts break open rather than breaking closed as we turn the pages of our lives.

*The Sixth Honoring: Taking the High Road*

To help families who were torn apart in the rawness of grief after 9/11, we started a program called "Take the High Road." By treating one another with patience, kindness, respect, humility, compassion, and understanding, surviving family members were expressing their love for the person who had died. By not allowing despair, anger, denial, blame, jealousy and resentment to erode or destroy our relationships, we honor them.

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## **Supporting Someone Who is Grieving A Few Do's and Don'ts for Family, Friends & Co-workers**

### **DO'S**

Express your condolences. A simple, sincere "I'm so sorry for your loss," a soft hand on their shoulder and/or a caring hug are usually perfect.

Be present. Stay in touch even when others begin to disappear.

Show you genuinely care through kind words and actions. It's OK to also show them you care with your tears.

Be a safe harbor for them to express their feelings. Allow them to grieve without fear of being judged, analyzed, fixed, cured, saved or healed.

Listen patiently and ask open-ended questions to see how they're doing, what they need and/or how you can be helpful.

Give them a multiple choice of things you'd like to do to help. This way, they'll know you're serious. Listen intently and do what *they* ask.

Give them every opportunity to talk about the person who died. If given the chance, tell stories acknowledging their life, special qualities they possessed and their significant relationships.

Ask them how they'd like your support on special dates like birthdays, holidays, "angel-versaries" (the day of their loved ones passing), etc.

Put your ego on the shelf and be of service to them by showing genuine concern, kindness, understanding, patience, empathy and compassion.

Stay humble, flexible, relaxed, and at ease to the best of your ability when you're with them.

Assist them in getting the grief support they need, including professional help from a counselor, coach or psychiatrist if necessary. Assure them it's not only OK, it's smart to ask for help when we need it.

Let them ease their way back into their now or old normal, including their daily routine, work life, relationships, etc. a few hours at a time until they can handle longer stretches of sustained activity. Taking vacation time, a "leave of absence" or a sabbatical may be necessary if possible.

Set up a "back up" or "buddy" system at home and work in case they have a meltdown, need to step back from things and grieve their loss.

Invite them (without the least bit of pressure) to join you for lunch, coffee or a walk in nature.

Tell them they (and their family) continue to be in your good thoughts and prayers.

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## **DONT'S**

Don't assume you know how they feel -- or what they want.

Don't put a psychological, religious or spiritual spin on their loss.

Don't use clichés or “the glass is half-full” “just be positive” messages.

Refrain from anything that might be interpreted as a “hurry up,” “you'll get over it,” “time heals all wounds” spin or assurance.

Don't give unsolicited advice or play shrink with them.

Don't try to compare your loss to theirs.

Don't suggest a quick-fix solution to take away their pain.

Don't take it personally if they're not responding to you the way you had hoped – and get “an attitude.” They are heartsick! It's not about you!

Don't allow your own feelings of helplessness, impatience or intolerance of their persisting sorrow to cause you to say something stupid or insensitive.

Don't ask how they're doing, or any other casual question unless you are prepared and qualified to listen.

Don't control the conversation. Let them take the lead on what they wish to talk about and ask respectful, open ended questions to draw them out.

Don't avoid, gloss over, act cute, change the subject or pretend like nothing has happened.

When they bring up the loss, respond in a way that shows them you're listening, you get it and you genuinely care.

Don't smother your co-worker with caregiving attention. They will need time to come up for air.

Don't in any way encourage them to hide, deny, repress, avoid, displace, dumb down or “medicate” the feelings of sorrow, anger or guilt that may have been triggered by their loss.

Don't make executive decisions about what they need without consulting them. Ask them what they'd like to have happen.

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