Grief, Loss, and What Cannot Be Repaired · About 4 minutes

Practical Care Before You Feel Ready

Letting necessary help arrive without having to explain the loss

At three, a child still needs to be collected from school. After a death, it can feel impossible that the clock is asking anything of you.

Practical care often begins before a person can explain anything. Someone can bring groceries while you remain bewildered. You can accept a ride without being ready for conversation. Help does not need to wait for a coherent account of your grief.

Consider Jo and her sister Cora in this fictional afternoon. Jo's partner has died. Cora has agreed to collect Jo's daughter from school and bring her home. Jo is relieved, then catches herself preparing what she will say when Cora arrives. She wants to explain her feelings well enough that her sister will understand. She isn't sure she wants to talk at all.

The collection is already arranged. Jo's ability to describe her grief is not part of that agreement. She can be grateful, numb, irritated, or unable to identify a feeling, and her daughter can still be brought home.

Make the help specific

A broad “Let me know if you need anything” can leave a grieving person with another job: decide what is needed, work out who might do it, and risk asking. A more useful offer often names something concrete: “I can collect her at three. Would that help?”

Details matter. In Jo's case, school collection is covered; dinner isn't. She might ask Cora to bring food, or Cora might offer. Until then, someone still needs to address it. Clear arrangements spare people from relying on care that is warmly intended but not yet available.

A simple check can be enough: What must happen today? What has someone actually agreed to do? What remains uncovered? These questions can be considered with a willing helper. They need not become a complete inventory of life after the death.

Shear's clinical review describes the practical and emotional demands of bereavement.[1] Taking the practical side seriously does not prescribe a particular way of grieving. It recognizes that a person may need assistance with daily life while the emotional reality is still very difficult to take in.

Jo might welcome dinner and want Cora to leave afterward. Cora may be available for a short visit but have work later. Saying either of those things helps make the offer usable. Neither person needs to turn a limited arrangement into a promise to manage the whole evening.

Sometimes there is no sister who can come. Money, disability, transport, and the availability of willing people shape what help is possible. Community services or professional support may be needed. The difficulty of finding help is not a failure to receive it gracefully.

If distress becomes frightening or interferes with basic care, seek professional help rather than waiting until the grief seems old enough or serious enough to deserve attention.

At three o’clock, accompaniment can mean that there is someone waiting at the school.

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At three, Jo's daughter needs someone waiting at the school. Cora can be there, and Jo can be wherever she is in her grief.

Companion reading · The Conversation That May Never Come

Full pathway companion · included with paid learning
Pathway introduction: Grief, Loss, and What Cannot Be Repaired (public introduction; full modules require access).

Sources and further reading

[1] Shear, M. K. (2012). Grief and mourning gone awry: Pathway and course of complicated grief. Dialogues in Clinical Neuroscience, 14(2), 119–128. Source.

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