

How *not* to help a friend in need



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A recent family crisis has taught me a lot about what it means to be a supportive friend.

My father, whose wife recently died, was briefly hospitalized himself in January, prompting me to board a plane, dog in tow, to aid his recovery. We both have many friends and colleagues who have called and texted with support.

How are you? What can I do to help? Any updates?

These are the sort of texts I myself have sent when I've reached out to a friend in need. What I've learned during this experience, though, is that many of those well-meaning calls and texts can sometimes be more of a burden than a help.

Today, I'm going to share some of the lessons I've learned from this experience. Here's a short guide to the dos and don'ts of helping out.

Do: Think twice before you call. I was surprised how often my father's cellphone rang and how exhausting it was for him (and me). Often, the calls woke him from much-needed sleep. It made me realize that phone calls during a crisis, although well intentioned, can feel intrusive and tiring. Obviously, phone calls are appropriate in certain situations, but my advice is to avoid calling at the height of the illness or crisis if you can.

Don't: Text for updates. Try to avoid sending a text that requires an answer. *How are you holding up? How are you feeling? What's the latest?* If your text ends with a question mark, it puts the burden on the patient or caregiver to respond.

Do: Send a text of support. Texts are less intrusive than phone calls and can be read on our own time. The best texts have been those that shared thoughts of support, offers of help or links to an interesting article, a photo memory or funny video — and then ended with, "Just thinking of you. No need to reply."

Don't: Ask people what they need. Many friends have kindly called or texted with the question: "What can I do to help?" But in the fog of illness and loss, it's really hard to know what you might need, so most of the time we just said, "Thanks. We'll let you know."

Do: Make a specific offer to help. Instead of asking what you can do to help, try making a specific, standing offer describing how you might be able to help. My colleague Karen Barrow, whose mother died recently, put it this way: "Don't ask how to help — just help. Just send a meal or help with a chore." Here are some examples of how to help when someone dies or is sick:

- I can help you write thank-you notes.
- I'm happy to pick up the kids from school.
- I'll come walk the dog.
- I have a truck if you need help with moving or making donations.

- I can run errands, shop, drive you to appointments or pick up prescriptions.
- I made cabbage rolls (or stew, dumplings, lasagna or cookies). I'll leave them on your porch. (Lots of food comes in the early days of a crisis; the meals a few weeks later often are a bigger help.)

Do: Use the mail. When you are sick or grieving, finding a card in the mail is a bright spot in your day. For the caregiver, the walk to the mailbox is a welcome break. Surprise deliveries, like fruit or flowers, are nice, too, especially in the weeks after someone dies and the initial outpouring of support fades. Opening a package to discover a lemon cake shipped from Vermont was a true delight.

Do: Share a story. Social media can be a great source of comfort to a sick or grieving person. My dad has appreciated reading the comments people posted on his Facebook page, and has particularly enjoyed hearing stories and memories about his late wife.

Obviously, each person has his or her own needs and preferences. Phone calls may be unwelcome in a hospital room or during recovery at home, but much appreciated a month or two later. When I asked Well readers to share their insights about caregiving, the most common piece of advice was this: Let the patient lead. And that's the biggest challenge for friends who want to show support — determining what each person or family needs for their specific situation.

While there's no one-size-fits-all solution, my best advice is that small gestures matter. A card in the mail, a funny story that makes you laugh or a surprise lemon cake left on the porch will always be a bright moment in someone's day.