

Tips for Supporting a Grieving Autistic Adult



Autism & Grief Project

Each person, situation, and grief response is unique. These suggestions should be tailored to meet the needs of the individual. See the Autism & Grief website at autismandgrief.org for additional information.

Immediately After a Death

Communicate Clearly and Honestly

- Communicate news of the death in a safe space with trusted people and allow time for processing the information.
- Use concrete terms. Do not use familiar abstract phrases like "passed away" or "went to be with angels" or "is in a better place."
- For those with high support needs, social stories that help describe situations visually may be the best way to communicate concepts related to the death.
- Be prepared to communicate how the individual's life could change because of the death and address anxiety surrounding it by providing as much reassurance as possible.

Provide Support

- Give the person space to grieve in their own way. Keep in mind that there could be a range of reactions, including no reaction, outbursts, laughter, repetitious vocalization, sensory overload, pacing, physical symptoms, and other self-soothing or regressive behaviors.
- If there is an absence of response or if behavior seems contrary to societal expectations regarding grief, do not assume that the individual is not grieving.
- Provide support in ways that have been previously comforting for the individual, such as structured routines, and avoid discomfoting experiences. If the individual does not like to be comforted physically through hugs, for example, honor that preference.
- Involve family, friends, and other existing support networks—including the any relevant faith community—to help provide support. This may be especially helpful if you are also grieving.

Planning for Events Memorializing the Deceased

Communicate and Provide Options

- Keep the autistic individual informed and involved with post-death ritual preparations and planning to the degree possible.

- If death rituals, such as a wake, sitting shiva, a funeral, or a memorial service occur, provide ways for them to be involved, including information about attendance, photos of the places they may choose to go, and a timeline of events.
- Social stories can also help prepare someone for what to expect and how to act at events.
- Communicate about the people who will attend and what will happen at each event. Be especially aware of sensory issues that may present a problem. Provide ways to avoid those problems, such as a comforting object to hold, earphones, or a smart phone.
- Do not force someone to attend an event. Always offer information, choice, and alternatives. Other options such as online participation or a private ceremony may be possible.

Plan and Prepare

- Create a list or calendar that includes important dates, times, and places, if that has been helpful for an individual in the past.
- Prepare them for what to expect using photos from websites, visiting locations such as a funeral home, church, mosque, temple, or cemetery beforehand, or by using social stories.
- Prepare the individual about how to respond to others who may be displaying outward emotions or who may want to hug or talk with them.
- Identify a trusted support person who can provide companionship during events if necessary; it may be helpful to identify someone for this who is not intimately involved with the events.
- Develop an exit strategy for the autistic individual that they can use if they need breaks or want to leave the event early.

In the Months Following the Loss

Be Patient

- Understand that grief does not follow a prescriptive path. There are no stages or timetables for grief.
- As with anyone who is bereaved, understand that there will be good and bad days, which can feel like a roller-coaster.
- Be sensitive to signs of grief and provide support if grief surges occur months or even years after the death.

Provide Support

- Being aware of previous losses experienced by the person and how they coped and adjusted to those losses may help provide a road map for supporting them in the current loss.
- Help the person maintain memories of the deceased by visiting places special to the deceased person, with photographs, or through expressive arts.
- If the person cannot return to their previous level of functioning six months after the loss, seek professional help from a trained grief counselor who is familiar with autism and sensitive to autistic needs.