



12 Ways Characters Can Respond to Someone Else's Grief

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When one of your characters experiences a heartbreaking loss, figuring out how he'll express or display his grief can be a challenge (a topic covered in-depth [in this article](#)). But you also need to be able to predict how other characters will interact with him during his sadness.

This guide unpacks twelve different ways that people commonly respond to grief so you have a wide variety of options at your disposal. We'll also suggest how you can use each one to advance your story.

For the sake of simplicity, we'll refer to the griever as a male, the friend as a female, and the reason for grief as the loss. Not all of the responses we'll cover are healthy or helpful. (Characters shouldn't be perfect after all!) However, in this guide, we'll focus more on the storytelling impact than the wisdom of certain reactions.

Let's dive in.



Response #1: Listening

The Response: It can take two forms. 1) A passive form of listening where the friend allows the griever to talk about his loss without commenting. 2) An active form of listening where the friend asks questions to try to better empathize with the griever.

The Motive: Seeking to make the griever feel heard and understood. Or, if the listening is entirely passive, the friend may fear that saying anything will further upset the griever.

The Storytelling Potential: You could reveal more about who the griever is and why he's hurting, especially if the friend is being an active listener. Sharing his pain with someone else may also help the griever to heal.

Response #2: Comparing

The Response: Mentioning a personal loss that's similar to the griever's.

The Motive: Perhaps the friend is narcissistic and wants to talk about herself. More likely, however, she's trying to show the griever that he's not alone because she can relate to his pain.

The Storytelling Potential: Readers could learn more about the friend (and possibly glimpse a larger picture of the story world). For the griever, it could either bring him comfort (enabling him to progress in his character arc) or cause frustration because the friend is claiming that she can feel his anguish when all grief is unique (escalating drama and tension).



Response #3: Advising

The Response: Giving the griever suggestions on how to cope with his loss.

The Motive: Usually to help the griever.

The Storytelling Potential: The advice could point the griever to a path forward so he's less overwhelmed with sorrow (advancing his character arc)—unless it's bad, which could cause drama instead. Conversely, if the griever just wants a shoulder to cry on, the unsolicited advice could be a source of conflict. No matter which direction you go, you'll have an opportunity to develop your story's theme. But be careful not to let the friend's dialogue become preachy!

Response #4: Distracting

The Response: Engaging in fun activities with the griever.

The Motive: Helping the griever forget his sadness. Or, more selfishly, to rush the griever back to normal because he's unpleasant company in his current state.

The Storytelling Potential: Since a novel can quickly become bogged down with grief, you could give the griever (and readers!) a break from the emotional turmoil. Or, if your plot calls for it, you could make the griever feel more alone because no one seems to care about his problems.



Response #5: Gloom

The Response: Telling the griever that he should probably expect more trouble ahead.

The Motive: Preparing the griever for trials. Or the friend may have a cynical/pessimistic mindset.

The Storytelling Potential: You could plant worries about the future, which could influence the griever's actions in the present. You could also heighten suspense if readers get the impression that circumstances will worsen later in the book.

Response #6: Avoiding

The Response: Either the friend doesn't acknowledge the loss in the griever's presence, or she ignores the griever altogether.

The Motive: Fear of awkwardness and confusion about what to say. People sometimes decide that dodging a sensitive topic is less risky than tackling it.

The Storytelling Potential: You could increase the griever's feelings of isolation and frustration, pushing him to a darker place in his character arc.

Response #7: Consoling

The Response: Fixating on all of the positive sides of life. "At least you still have.."

The Motive: Cheering up the griever.

The Storytelling Potential: If the griever has had time to process his loss, reminding him of his blessings could motivate him to persevere. If the pain is still raw, the friend's comments could seem calloused and cause a relational rift.



Response #8: Grief Coaching

The Response: Telling the griever how to react and when to move on. “You need to get over your loss.” or “Why aren’t you crying?”

The Motive: Guiding the griever toward healing. Or, as with distracting, pressuring the griever to be his happy self again.

The Storytelling Potential: The friend’s judgment could heap additional shame onto the griever, negatively affecting his character arc. In a few rare situations, it could instead show the griever what his values should be and nudge him forward in his arc.

Response #9: Spiritualizing

The Response: Connecting the loss to a biblical truth.

The Motive: Giving the griever a maxim to hold onto that will support him or help him overcome harmful lies.

The Storytelling Potential: Depending upon the truths that the friend is pointing toward, you could: 1) Develop your theme and give the griever a rock to stand on. 2) Increase relational tension if the griever feels preached at instead of cared for. 3) Let the griever cling to shallow truths and grow frustrated when they fail him, revealing problematic answers to your story’s thematic questions.



Response #10: Vase-Handling

The Response: Treating the griever as delicate and keeping him out of situations or conversations the friend believes would be triggering.

The Motive: Concern that the griever will fall apart any second and a desire to prevent further strain.

The Storytelling Potential: If the friend knows threatening information, you could create dramatic irony and tension as readers wonder what will happen when the griever learns the secret.

Response #11: Serving

The Response: Caring for the griever's physical needs.

The Motive: To lighten the griever's burden so he can focus on recovering from the tragedy and dealing with the aftermath.

The Storytelling Potential: You'll force two characters to interact more than they would otherwise, and by extension, it could deepen their relationship.

Response #12: Empathizing

The Response: Mourning the griever's loss alongside him, whether through crying or simply holding the griever as he weeps. Listening or advising can also go hand-in-hand with this response.

The Motive: Supporting the griever and assuring him that his loss matters.

The Storytelling Potential: As the friend walks with the griever through his dark valley, it could lead him toward healing. The scene could also reveal the full extent of the loss and what it meant to the griever, thereby developing him as a character.