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What to Say What Not to Say to Someone Who is Grieving

OVERVIEW

Someone you care about is grieving because someone they love has died. What do you say or not say to this person? Does it make a difference if what you are saying is found to be caring and comforting or, conversely, hurtful and upsetting? Yes, it does make a difference. In fact, science has shown repeatedly that the type of grief support a person receives is a key component in that person's ability to deal with the everyday struggles of picking up the pieces of the lives they used to have and rebuilding a new life without their loved one there. So think of it this way: When you say something to someone who is grieving, you want what you say to them to be comforting and show that you care. Yet, how are you supposed to know what is safe and helpful, especially if you haven't had your own experiences with loss. That's why we have compiled this information for you.

So what do you say; what don't you say? Here we have made it easy for you.

This guide is comprised of actual comments made to people who were grieving—the ones that were helpful and the ones that were not. If you follow our guidelines, you will know what a person who is grieving can handle hearing, wants to hear, or finds comforting to hear, and you can safely and lovingly share those comments. Conversely, you will also know what is upsetting to someone who is grieving, and you can avoid those comments. Of course, as with grief itself, everyone is different, so don't ever hesitate to simply ask the person to let you know if you ever say anything they don't find comforting or if you are not saying something they would like to hear.

WHAT TO SAY (Comforted if these are said)



1. Say the person's name—forever and ever—and keep saying it for the rest of the griever's life. Talk about the person whenever the opportunity is there to do so.

This is one of the most important recommendations of all. We cannot stress this enough. Because a person died does not mean that the relationship with that person died, too. Just as we don't stop talking about a person who is alive but unreachable in a



remote location somewhere in this world, we also don't stop talking about a person who has died. That's because the love and relationship with the person who died is still very much alive, only shifted in nature and form. The memories and the deep need to keep them a part of their lives is also alive. You can help them do just that. For instance, is a brother or sister whose sibling died still that child's brother or sister? Of course they are, and they will tell you that is true. They will forever refer to their brother or sister, share stories, and let others know they have x number of siblings, always including the one who died. Death may end a physical life, but it never ends the love. We never stop loving someone just because they died, and we never stop having a relationship with them either. This is a healthy thing for people to do. You can help them.

Saying the name of the loved one means so much to those who are grieving. It's like music to their hearts. This remains true for the rest of their lives. If the name comes up, you can just listen, add something about the person as part of the conversation, or share a memory you have. Just let it happen naturally. In other words, you don't have to force it. Be careful that, when the person brings up their loved one, you don't squirm, go quiet, or act as if something was said that shouldn't have been said. Your discomfort can be felt. Rather, just know that bringing up the loved one is a natural part of keeping their memory alive, and that it is a positive and good thing.

2. "I am so sorry" or "I am so sorry for your loss."

This is one you hear all of the time; yet, it actually means a lot to most people who are grieving, but only if you say it with sincerity, from your heart, not just from rote memory. Say it from a place of compassion and love, and it will be felt sincerely.

3. "I can't imagine what you are going through" or simply "I can't imagine ..."

This is a truthful and heartfelt thing to say to someone who has experienced a loss that you have never experienced. For instance, if you are speaking with someone who tells you their child died, you would say, "I can't imagine such a loss." Of course, if you have had the same loss, you would change this accordingly because you have walked many miles in their shoes. You could even say, "I also lost my child 12 years ago ..."

4. "I want you to know how much I care." Or "I wish I could do something to help."

Again, this is where speaking truthfully and from your heart comes in. If you stay away from platitudes you usually can't go wrong. You can create your own similar kind words.

5. "I miss him/her, too."

6. "I have been thinking about you and want you to know I care."

This can be sent in an email, text, or left as a message on their phone with no expectation of a reply.

7. "I was remembering that time..."



Share a special positive or personal memory. Grievers often learn a lot of wonderful things about their loved ones listening to other people's stories. They will be forever grateful.

8. "I wish I had known him/her" or "I'm glad I've gotten to know him/her through you."

If you have never met the loved one but are a friend of the griever, these are lovely things you can say.

9. "It's good to talk with (or see) you" or "What did you do today?" or "Just calling to say hello."

These are replacements for asking, "How are you?" Many people find the question "How are you?" upsetting because they feel like you are asking them a rhetorical question that has an obvious answer: "How do you think I am? My husband just died!" Losing someone you love is painful, and just getting through each day is often a challenge. Also, when you ask, "How are you?" you put the person in a difficult position of either having to politely pretend ("Fine" because they don't want to upset you OR because they believe that you don't actually want to hear how they really are) or delve into painful details they may not wish to recount at that time. A question that is more concrete and specific is better. The person can more easily answer the specific question and then elaborate further if they choose. That's why we suggest when you are checking in with them, you say something specific like "How was your day so far?"

FINAL THOUGHTS ON WHAT TO SAY:

A person grieving is in a place that is usually foreign to him or her. And even if they had other losses, each loss is new and unique. Just a text or phone call (without ever expecting a response) saying that you care is thoughtful and comforting.

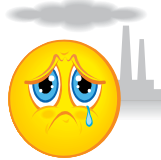
Once the services are over, life continues on as ever before for everyone else, but not for the grieving person. For them, their lives become more and more difficult and challenging with time. Grievers often say that things get worse and harder as time moves onward and they have had the time to live with the realities of life without their loved one. The griever needs people to understand that they are continuing to grieve, even when it seems like it has been a long time. No one "gets over" losing someone they love, and, as time goes by, they want their loved one to be remembered. You can be a supportive part of the griever's journey so they don't feel abandoned or misunderstood, sending the message "You are not alone." So, over time, keep in touch and remember that birthdays, anniversaries of the loss, and holidays can be especially challenging. If you simply acknowledge on those days that you know it is a rough day, or that you are thinking of the person, it can be very helpful. Of course, if you are so inclined, by inviting the person to lunch or to go for a walk can be an additional source of comfort, even if they should decline.

Finally, research shows that the type of love and support you give someone who is grieving makes a difference in their ability to pick up the pieces and rebuild their lives.



A person who is grieving needs to create a “new normal,” which includes figuring out how to live life without their loved one here. At the same time, they are creating a new relationship with the person that is no longer about their loved one’s physical presence. This is one of the most challenging things a person has to do, and it takes time, hard work, and lots of love and support. You can make a huge difference.

WHAT NOT TO SAY (Sad if these are said)



OVERVIEW:

Platitudes about grief have made their way through all our lives, and generation after generation continues to use them. Grief platitudes are those comments you have heard over eons of time, such as “Time heals all wounds,” “Everything happens for a reason,” “What doesn’t kill you makes you stronger,” and “It must have been part of God’s plan.” However, those who are grieving will tell you they don’t find those comments comforting or helpful, and sometimes they find them downright infuriating. Some of them are not true at all, some might be true for you but not the griever, and some are actually hurtful.

Let’s see if together we can break the pattern of using these platitudes and make the grief journey a little softer for those on it.

Below we have chosen several of the most often heard statements by grievers. Again, these are all actual comments made by people who thought they were helping, but in the real course of the griever’s life, the comments were found not to be comforting.

1. “I know how you feel.”

In reality, no one can know how anyone else truly feels. Only the griever had that relationship with the person who died. This comment also sends a message that you are comparing your loss to theirs. If you have actually had the same loss, try saying something like, “I also lost my daughter. Losing a child is so terrible.” Sometimes we say, “I also lost a brother, so as much as anyone can, I understand your pain.” Otherwise, best to avoid this comment.

2. “Time heals all wounds.”

Over time, the initial grief does get better, even if a person does nothing, yet doing nothing about the grief that follows can lead to future problems if not dealt with properly. So it’s really what a person does with the time that makes the difference. The “time heals all wounds” statement says that there isn’t anything you need to do with your



grief except wait it out. It also implies that grief is like a “wound” that will heal in a linear fashion. Grief doesn’t work that way. Grief needs to be given a voice, which means that it needs an outlet. There are thousands of options on how to do just that.

3. “At least she’s no longer in pain.”

That is definitely true, and no one would ever wish their loved one was still here who was suffering, yet the problem with this comment is that you are trying to say something to be reasonable and help the person stop wishing their loved was here. This denies their true feelings (I would do anything to have him/her back) and is almost a little preachy.

4. “It must have been her time.” “God only takes the best ones.” “She’s in a better place.”

All of the spiritual comments you might believe or find comforting should someone you love die are not necessarily comforting or even true for the person to whom you are talking. Even if the person does believe anything said about the spiritual essence of a person’s death, they still might not find these comforting at the time.

We suggest you are careful with saying anything religious or spiritual unless you know for sure the griever will be comforted by what you say.

5. “Call me if there is anything I can do.”

This puts the responsibility on them to (1) know what they might need from you (which they usually don’t); and, (2) actually reach out and ask you for something. Better if you just call them and just “do” what it is you think they might need. For instance, “I am happy to bring dinner by tonight. Would that be okay?” or “I would love to come by, pick up your laundry, and bring it back to you the next day. Would that be okay?”

6. “How are you?”

You know how they are, so avoid this one. If you want to know how they are doing, try saying something specific they can address, such as “What did you do this morning?” or “Did you go to book club last night?”

7. “Did you try this...?” “You should do this...”

Stop with the suggestions of what a grieving person should do. Comments like these send the message that the person should change, so it’s best to avoid anything where you are trying to change the way they feel. These comments are annoying to those who are grieving because they just want people to “be” there with them, not give them advice. For instance, people say, “Are you exercising? You should exercise. Those endorphins will really help.” Or, “You should get out more. It will really help you.” Avoid giving advice or using “the shoulds.” Just listen without interjecting your remedies. The one exception to this would be if you have also had a loss and found something that really helped you, such as a grief group you attended, but only as a suggestion.

8. “Be thankful because it could have been worse.”



A logical or reasonable comment like this is not comforting at all. A person who might compare something that happened to someone else as being so much worse is implying that the griever shouldn't feel as bad as they do because, after all, much more awful things "could" have happened. But a person only knows their own experience—their own pain.

9. "Be strong." Or to a child whose parent has died, "You need to be strong now for your family." Or "You are now the man of the family."

This is one of the most important things never to say. First, what does "be strong" mean? Don't cry? Keep busy? Don't show your emotions in the "inappropriate" places? Pull yourself up and get on with life? Everyone who is grieving IS strong in their own way. Sometimes just to get out of bed and get dressed is the best they can do. Further, it takes great strength to face and deal with losing someone you love, so they are already doing the best they can.

With regard to the additional comments, never, ever tell a child or teen that they need to be strong or that they are now the head of the family or that they need to take care of their mother or anything like that. Children need to grieve and be children. Letting out their grief and getting back to their normal routines as quickly as possible is what is most healthy for them.

10. "Don't cry."

This is another one never to say to anyone who is grieving. I know it's tempting to say with love, "Oh, don't cry. It will be okay." Don't say anything when they are crying; hand them a tissue. OR, better yet, you just cry right along with them. In fact, always remember that your tears show how much you care. Just make sure it doesn't turn into the griever having to take care of you.

12. "What 'stage' are you in?" Or "Sounds like you are in the 'such and such' stage."

There are no stages of grief. This is a myth. There are not five stages of grief. There are not any stages of grief. Grieving is like being on a roller coaster ride, up and down and all around, and that is normal. Grief does not come with nice, linear stages that a person has to get through before they are done with their grief. If you haven't watched the *Now You Know*™ grief myths on the website, this is covered there.

13. "I hear that most marriages end when a child dies. How are you guys doing?"

One of the biggest grief myths is that most marriages end when a child dies. This is absolutely untrue. In fact, most marriages go on to be deeper and richer than ever before. If you haven't watched the *Now You Know*™ grief myths on the website, this is covered there.

14. "You need to put this behind you so you can go on."

A person never puts the death of someone they love behind them because it's always with them. In fact, what they do is bring their loved one with them into the new life



they are rebuilding. Remember that they are having to completely rebuild their lives without that person in this world. With that process, they are also creating that new relationship with their loved one, which means the person who died will come with them into that new life that is created and will always be a part of their lives. This is healthy and good.

15. “Don’t think about that.” or “Think of the good times.”

Again, this shows that you are trying to change the way they are grieving. Some people can think of the good times right away and find peace in those memories. Others find that thinking of the good times only reminds them of what they’ve lost, so for a while they need to avoid doing that. Again, steer away from giving advice where you are trying to change what the person is doing or feeling.

16. “Are you dating yet?” or “You will fall in love again one day.”

A person whose spouse has died may never want to fall in love or date again. That is up to them. They will get on with life at the pace that works for them. With that, it’s best to never suggest someone start dating whose spouse or significant other has died or even to suggest that one day they will find love again. Maybe they will, but they need to come to that realization on their own.

17. “What happened?”

Oftentimes when people first find out a person has died, they will want to know how the person died and what happened to end the person’s life. Curiosity is normal, but in this case, it’s a very inappropriate question. If the person wants you to know, they will tell you.

18. “When my mother died...when my father died...when my pet died...”

If someone has just shared with you about their loss, it’s a normal response to want to share with them your losses as a way of bonding so that the griever will see that you also understand grief; however, try to listen to what they are saying and share some of the “what to say” comments above, rather than your stories. At least let the person finish sharing whatever it is that they want to say about their loss and then see if they can handle hearing about your losses. The griever feels you weren’t listening and/or they now have to comfort you when you share your stories of loss.

19. “He wouldn’t want you to be unhappy.” Or “She would want you to be happy.”

Even if you know the person who died and you know for sure he or she would want their loved one to be happy, this is not a comforting thing for you to tell someone who is grieving, in pain, and struggling. Essentially you are adding a burden to their grief and saying, “He/she would not like it that you are not happy.” It is also sending the message that they “should not” be sad. How can they be happy right now? They are grieving. One day they will be happy again, but right now it’s appropriate for them to be sad.

20. “You were lucky to have had her at all.”



What year would you be willing to give up your loved one to death? No need to remind them how lucky they were to have had their amazing loved one. They already know that. Yet, they miss and long for that person, and that is normal.

21. “Thank God you have other children.” Or, “Have you thought about having other children or adopting?”

This implies that the child they lost is replaceable or that somehow having another child will fill the hole in their hearts. Some parents have said they feel like the person who says things like this is saying, “Just get another kitten and you will feel better.”

22. “Something good always comes out of every tragedy.” Or, “There’s a silver lining in everything.”

That may be true about many things in life, yet these statements are sending a message to the person that, even though it is sad that their loved one died, regardless of how horrific the circumstances of their death might have been, you know that something good and amazing will come from it, and you know that this silver lining or good thing that will eventually happen would not have happened had their loved one not died. Yikes! Something wonderful does not actually come out of every tragedy. What does come out of every tragedy is a new person who slowly rebuilds his or her life. With your love and support, they will find that new way of living without their loved one there.

FINAL THOUGHTS ON WHAT TO SAY:

Did you notice the pattern in almost all the comments?

We suggested you avoid three major categories:

(1) Don’t try to change what the person feels, thinks or believes or how the person is grieving. This includes any comments that are judgmental or giving advice about what they should be doing differently;

(2) Stay away from sharing what you would find comforting or what you believe to be true, including spiritual or religious comments, and instead share what the griever will find comforting or believes; and,

(3) Avoid sharing your stories of loss too soon when someone is first sharing theirs, especially if theirs is new and you had had time to deal with yours. Instead, as much as you can, just listen.

Everyone is different, so if you stick to the basic loving, nonjudgmental, thoughtful comments, you will be a part of those who help the griever as they find their own way of picking up the pieces and rebuilding their lives. We promise that they will do exactly that.

With your help and love, those who are grieving will find comfort in your presence and be able to hold onto that as the days, weeks, months and years move onward. You will be a positive part of their grief journey, and they will be eternally grateful.



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