

“But I Don’t Know What to Say...”

How to talk with a person in grief

You just found out that your friend's partner passed away unexpectedly. Your heart sinks, partially from sadness for your friend, but also because you know you should go to her. Try to comfort her. You feel your pulse quicken. "But I don't know what to say," you think to yourself, "What if I say something wrong?"

We all feel this way at times. Always wanting to say the perfect thing, to do the thing that is just right to help our hurting loved one through rough times. But the topic of death is so taboo in our society that we are rarely taught what is comforting in times of grief versus what is well-intended but not helpful. Here are a few basic groundrules for being with a grieving person:

1. Always address the loss. Not saying anything about the death can lead the griever to believe that her loss is not important.
2. Allow feelings of all kinds to enter the conversation. A grieving person's emotions may vary widely during the course of a conversation. This is normal and you can help by creating a safe place for him to experience his feelings.
3. Remember that each person's path of grief has its own length and curves in it. Honor the person's unique journey.

Below you'll find a list of common phrases that aren't particularly helpful across from which are suggestions for more comforting phrases. Many times, when I am trying to help my partner around the house, I will do something that ends up making more of a mess than anything. We call these efforts "good intentions gone awry." Many of us do this same thing when trying to talk with a friend or loved one who is grieving, so you'll notice that the less-comforting column is titled "Good Intentions Gone Awry" while the more-comforting column is just a little "Better."

GOOD INTENTIONS GONE AWRY:

BETTER:

I'm sure it's what God intended.

I'm so sorry.

This has the possibility of creating anger toward God or a higher power in the grieving person. Also, it's very important to know the person's belief system before mentioning anything about God or a higher power. Don't assume the person has the same faith or beliefs that you do.

God will never give you more than you can handle.

This must be so hard for you.

Same problem as above. Even if the person has a faith system that includes God, this phrase has the tacit implication that if you can't handle things, you must not have enough faith, you're a bad Christian, etc.

I'm sure it's all for the best.

It's so hard to understand why these things happen.

At this point, the grieving person doesn't see that anything is for the best except to have her loved one back.

Saying nothing at all.

I'm not sure what to say but I want you to know I'm here for you.

This is actually one of the worst things that can happen to a grieving person: having people ignore his pain. If you're not sure what to say, or are uncertain that the person wants to talk about it, it's okay to say just that.

and/or

Do you feel like talking about her death right now?

He's in a better place.

You must miss him terribly.

or

Just be happy he isn't in pain anymore.

The place she wants him to be is with her, no matter how much pain he was in or how difficult the caregiving was.

I know exactly how you feel.

This is very tempting to say, but be careful: Even if you have experienced a loss, each person has their own unique path to travel so you can't know exactly how he feels. Besides, you didn't lose this particular loved one, he did.

I can't begin to understand how you feel.

You'll feel better soon.

Ouch! It's so hard to watch a friend or family member grieve... we often want her to feel better so we'll feel better! Remember, she may be thinking she'll never feel better so presuming how she is going to feel in the future may be very frustrating for her.

I'll be here for you for as long as you need me.

Don't you think you should be over it by now?

Most grieving people feel like they are never going to "get over it" and it's probably not very accurate to say that losing a loved one can be "gotten over." The pain will likely diminish and the memories become sweet again rather than sad, but the loss will always be in the person's life in some way.

I know this is still really painful for you.

You should _____.

Each person has her own unique path of grief to follow so, although well-meaning, it isn't helpful or comforting to make suggestions as to how she should grieve or suggest that she do certain activities to help her feel better. However, it is okay to ask her if she would like to do something but don't push it if she'd rather not.

*Do what you need to do to grieve -
I'll support you however I can.*

and/or

*Do you feel like taking a walk or
getting a breath of fresh air?*

She wouldn't have wanted you to be sad.

This, again, may engender guilt in the grieving person. Losing someone is sad, even if the loved one who is now gone did not want it to be that way.

I can see that you are really sad and miss her so much.

Talking about him all the time is not going to bring him back.

The grieving person needs to talk about her loved one. Listening to stories about the one who died - even if you have to hear the same stories over and over - is a comforting and powerful way to help the grieving person process her loss. Often, the griever is fearful that her loved one will be forgotten, so telling one of your stories about him reassures her that his memory lives on.

Tell me one of your favorite stories about him.

and/or

One of my favorite stories about him is...

Feeling that way won't help a thing.

All feelings are okay for the grieving person. Some emotions like anger and regret can be very difficult to hear, but it's important that the griever has a safe place to express his feelings.

How are you feeling today?

and

I can hear that you're feeling _____ (name the emotion being expressed.)

You'll get married again.

or

You can always have more children.

or

At least you have your other children.

But the person she really wants back and is grieving for isn't here and she will not ever be able to replace him. Honor that.

I know how special he was to you and how much you loved him.

Just stay busy and you'll be okay.

This is dismissive of the person's feelings, no matter how good the intention. It is okay to say what worked for you when you experienced grief, but make sure it's not in the form of a command.

When I was grieving, staying busy was helpful for me, but that may or may not be what works best for you.

You shouldn't be sad in front of the children.

Children are often more upset by what they don't know than what they do know, so sometimes it's appropriate to model normal grief for the children.

How are the kids feeling about her death?

It's time for you to get yourself together.

Each person's path of grief is unique. Maybe it isn't time for her to get herself "together" yet. Even if she is not functioning well enough to take care of herself or her family, it may be best to get friends and loved ones to pitch in to take care of the family for awhile rather than shaming her or having her feel that she's "not handling this better."

It looks like this is a rough day for you. How about if I bring some dinner over at 6:00?

It could be worse - at least you had the chance to say goodbye.

From his vantage point, nothing could be worse than how he is feeling now. Attempts to point out situations that are "even worse" than his will not help.

You're really missing her, aren't you?

Now you can do all the things you've always wanted to do.

Even if the relationship was difficult, this is not a very helpful thing to say to someone who has had a recent loss and, in fact, may make her feel guilty about the idea of doing things without her loved one.

Tell me some of the things you used to do together.

or

I remember when the two of you would do _____ together.

Trying to cheer him up by telling jokes.

Humor can be really helpful in a lot of situations, but make sure that your use of humor isn't just to change the subject away from feelings of sadness.

I bet you miss her sense of humor.

Let me know if I can help.

In many instances, the grieving person either doesn't know what help she needs or it's too hard to ask for help. Making specific suggestions and then asking her if it would be okay is much more concrete and useful. And respect her right to say that she doesn't want any help right now.

I think it's garbage day. Is it okay if I take your garbage out for you?

or

I know it takes a lot of energy to do the kids' laundry - how about if I throw some of these clothes in the washer for you?

Here are a few links to some other great websites with ideas for what to say (and not to say) to someone in grief:

Chandrama Anderson has an excellent article on The Language of Grieving at her website www.chandramaanderson.com

David Kessler, a colleague of Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, has The 10 Best and Worst Things to Say to Someone in Grief. <http://grief.com/helpful-tips/the-10-best-and-worst-things-to-say-to-someone-in-grief/>

A great blogger named Mostly Risible has written an oft-quoted piece called On Overcoming Grief: Tips from a Hospice Volunteer. <http://www.blogger.com/node/10191>

To really understand the perspective of someone in grief, read Connie Small's excellent, moving article What You Say... (What I Hear) <http://www.grieflossrecovery.com/grief-articles/small03>

A hospital chaplain shares some very good advice in When There's Nothing to Say. <http://improbableoptimisms.blogspot.com/2007/07/when-theres-nothing-to-say.html>

Helpguide.org has a very comprehensive article on Supporting a Grieving Person. http://www.helpguide.org/mental/helping_grieving.htm