

## **What Not to Say to a Grieving Friend or Family Member**

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Speechless. That's what many of us are in the face of someone who is bereaved. Whether they've lost a family member, or a pet, or a job, or a relationship, we just don't know what to say. The feelings of sympathy, empathy, concern and caring all are in place, but we're afraid to speak for fear that it will be the wrong thing. So we say nothing. Too often, we avoid the situation entirely and leave the person to grieve alone.

Publicly mourning a loss is a very important part of the bereavement journey. For those who are not able to mourn publicly and share their loss with others, the process can be stalled. For those who are able to do this open sharing of their sadness, mourning can ultimately help to bring the person to a reconciliation of that loss. Losses change us forever; life is never the same after we lose a loved one or experience life transitions. As we learn how to help others in their grief process, it is helpful to remember that by entering into their experience, we are helping them to go through it and come out the other side of their pain – forever changed, but whole in a whole new way.

Losses of all imaginable types occur in caregivers' lives. Directly, there are personal losses like deaths in the family, deaths of pets, career changes, change in roles, children leaving, loss of home or financial losses. These are transitions we all experience at some time. Professional losses in caregiving teams include death of patients from illness or trauma, loss of position, organizational changes – loss of 'what was,' loss of perceived or actual rank, loss of direct reports, loss of respect, colleagues leaving, loss of promotions, loss of raises. And there are the losses (many of them the same) that are being experienced by our clients. We must be aware that all these losses can cause a person to grieve. Loss is loss – it is not for us to judge what another person is feeling, or to judge the significance of the event, or to judge the depth of feeling that person has. But it is for us to be aware, to acknowledge it and to say what we hope is helpful to that person.

But it's so awkward. We have such limited experience with this. We want to help; what do we do?

There is good news here. There is an easy-to-remember thing that can be said with heartfelt sincerity, and that is, simply, "I'm sorry." Often this is enough to allow them to respond with a brief "thank you" if that's all they can muster at the time, or it can open the door for more sharing – the choice is theirs. As you become a companion to those who mourn, your role is to listen, to acknowledge, to just being there for them. The key is that you follow their lead. Often a simple active listening technique such as paraphrasing lets them know you're really there. Pay attention. Look at them. As in any conversation, the bereaved person knows when you're distracted or disinterested. Be genuine. Make some observations about their feelings or changes you've noticed in them since you last talked. As you companion this person, the trust grows and you become an even better helper to them. For those who have taken communication training, does this sound familiar? Just as in any effective conversation or communication, the skills are basically the same.

As you continue encounters with the bereaved person, simple questions like, "How are you surviving?" may be appropriate. If you ask them open-ended questions like that one, you're likely to get more complete answers. When you ask closed questions that can be answered with "yes" or "no," most likely that's what you'll get. Yes, that does show you're concerned, but it's not as much help in the grieving process as if you had asked a more open-ended question that invited them to share their true feelings. Then, when you've opened the gates, just listen. They may want to tell their story over and over, but that is healing to them. As their companion, you listen.

When tears come, what do you do? Just begin with "I'm so sorry." And be present for them – truly present.

Here are some of the things we should not say. Dr. Alan Wolfelt of the Center for Loss and Life Transition, in his books *Healing Grief at Work*, *Healing Your Grieving Heart* has offered a list of some clichés that we often use. These words tend to dismiss the feelings of loss, and can detour the grief process. Most of us have heard or have used these sayings ourselves in the event of a death.

I know how you feel.  
It was God's will.  
Give it time.  
You just need to keep busy.  
Now s/he's in a better place.  
Be strong.  
At least he didn't suffer.  
It's time to move on.  
Try not to think about it.  
Be glad you had him as long as you did.  
She wouldn't have wanted you to be sad.  
Life is for the living.  
Oh, don't be sad.  
Get a hold of yourself.  
Just think about what you have to be thankful for.  
Get on with your life.  
Keep your chin up.  
This is a blessing.  
You still (can) have other children.  
You can get another pet.  
Now you have an angel in heaven.  
Time heals all wounds.  
You're strong. You'll get over it.

Although the sayings noted above were offered in the event of a death, variations of these clichés are used in the event of nearly any type of loss. When we use these types of sayings or advice, the mourner tends to move away from the experience or the pain rather than toward it. In order to mourn 'well,' we must move toward the pain. While they know the words were meant well, they might respond directly, or quietly to themselves, "You don't know how I feel," or "Where is the blessing in this?" or "I don't want an angel in heaven. I want my angel right here with me." Moving toward the pain helps the bereaved person to continue through the healing process and to reconcile the loss. "I'm so sorry; I'm here for you. How are you doing?" acknowledges the loss and opens the door for sharing.

Children whose pets die need some extra attention. Parents often do not know what to do or what to say to their child when the pet dies, especially in the event of euthanasia. Many times, a child's first experience with death is the death of their pet. The ways the parent and other significant adults (including the veterinary professionals) react become a model for the child's behavior. The child definitely is watching for clues. Yet, children somehow seem to dose themselves in the sadness better than adults. Watch children playing and being sad alternately and you will see how they are able to process the loss. Be sure the child knows that the death was not their fault, especially in the case of euthanasia. Tell the truth about the experience, and about what is done with the body. Help the child find outlets for the grief they experience. Memorials, artwork, poetry and stories all are helpful as children process the loss. Choose your words carefully. Many children have had sleep disorders after they learned that their pet was being "put to sleep."

It is amazing just how much influence we have in the lives of others as they experience life transitions. If we are aware and truly pay attention to the cues we are receiving from those who are bereaved, we can be helpful companions to them through their grief journey.