

What to Say to Someone Who Has Lost a Loved One

By Jeanette Stehr-Green

It has happened to all of us. A friend, neighbor, or family member has lost a loved one. We want to offer comfort and support, but we just don't know what to say. Worse yet, we say something, and it makes both us and the grieving person feel worse.

Because each person's grief is unique, there is no one right thing to say to someone who has lost a loved one. Here, however, are a few tips.

Listen with compassion but without judgement. Your job is to create a safe space for the person to share their feelings. Offer gentle prompts or follow-up questions to encourage further sharing. Keep the focus on the person suffering the loss, not yourself.

Sometimes the grieving person needs to talk about something other than the deceased as they try to create a new normal without their loved one. Let the grieving person take the lead and talk about whatever they want to talk about.

Sometimes silence is what is needed in the chaos that follows a death. Be willing to sit in silence, be present and attentive, and "hold space" for the person.

When you speak, choose your words carefully. Acknowledge the person's loss as simply as possible. (See Sidebar.) Avoid platitudes that can minimize the person's feelings or references to your own religious or spiritual views that the grieving person might not share. Do not compare their loss to your own losses or life challenges.

If you knew the deceased, share memories of them or talk about the positive role that they played in your life, family, or community. Such statements can help the grieving person know that their loved one touched other people's lives and will not be forgotten.

Offer practical help. General statements, such as "let me know if I can help in any way," are often dismissed. To increase the likelihood that the grieving person will request your assistance, ask if there are specific tasks with which you can help such as providing a meal, babysitting, or running errands. Be as specific as possible about when you are available to help.

Stay in touch with the bereaved person. Grief does not end with the funeral or celebration of life. Let the grieving person know that you are there for them if they need to talk. Check in with them a few weeks after the death and continue checking in on a regular basis, in person, by phone, through email, or with cards.

Dates like birthdays, anniversaries, and holidays can be especially difficult. On these occasions, reach out to the bereaved person and ask how you can help them through the date. Perhaps you can provide a distraction or join them in honoring the memory of their loved one. A visit to the loved one's grave, creation of a memorial, or participating in a charity event that had meaning to the deceased can be good ways to honor their loved one.

Finally, watch for signs of clinical depression or possible self-harm. Intense sadness after the loss of a loved one is common, but debilitating symptoms, expressions of wanting to do self-harm, or sadness that lasts far more than a year are not normal. If you see signs of concern, suggest to the grieving person that they connect with community resources or professionals.

Talking with someone who has lost a loved one is not easy but can provide comfort and support. Remember that you cannot fix a grieving person or take away their pain, but you can listen actively, validate feelings, share memories, and offer practical support that will help the person begin the healing journey.

Jeanette Stehr-Green volunteers at Volunteer Hospice of Clallam County along with a host of other community members who provide respite care, grief and bereavement support, and access to free medical equipment.

SIDEBAR

There is no one right thing to say to someone who has lost a loved one.

Helpful things to say

- “I am so sorry for your loss.”
- “I wish I had the right words. Please know that I care.”
- “I’m sorry that I can’t make things better.”
- “I have happy memories with [name of the deceased]. Here is one story.”
- “There are so many things I appreciated about [name of the deceased]. Here are some of them and reasons why I will always remember them.”
- “I am here to listen when you need to talk.”
- Give a hug instead of saying anything.

Things not to say

- “I know how you feel.”
- “It’s part of God’s plan.”
- “They’re in a better place now.”
- “There’s a reason for everything.”
- “Look at what you have to be thankful for.”
- “They were sick for a long time and maybe it is better now that they’re gone.”
- “Be strong, don’t cry.”
- “The person who has died would not want you to feel sad.”
- “At least they lived a long time.”