

How to Talk About the Loss of a Loved One: Dos and Don'ts of Comforting Others

Advice and comments from readers of the *Crucial Skills Newsletter* who have lost loved ones

What to Say

Simply say, "I'm sorry"

- A simple "I'm sorry" says it all for me. I know people mean well, they just want to help and probably feel helpless in these situations. Sometimes saying less means so much more.
- Don't avoid the grieving person because you don't know what to say. "I'm sorry for your loss" is enough. Your mere presence is enough.
- When I had a miscarriage many years ago, my great aunt said, "I am so sorry for your loss." In this simple comment, she acknowledged our loss and the humanity of it, and she gave us hope and a deep sense of her caring.

Intent matters more than words

- This is truly a case where the content or the message does not matter as much as the intent or feeling. Somebody who grasps my hand and is positively speechless—but I feel their love and support—is worth more than a million well-crafted messages, feigned empathy, or promises of prayers and heaps of good thoughts.
- The most positive comment was sent to me in a card and it simply said, "There are no words." I felt this individual understood grief better than anyone I had ever met and now when I am with people in grief I try to remember those words and use them myself rather than make uncomfortable, dumb comments.
- I recommend you offer condolences and say, "I've been thinking about you and/or praying for you." A simple, "I don't know what to say" or a hug is far better than a question that I have to respond to such as, "How are you?"

Share memories of the lost loved one

- When I am talking to someone who has lost a loved one, I try to tell him or her a little story about something the loved one did that was really funny, about an adventure we had, or something I really admired about that person. The anecdote may be something he or she never heard or knew about and may bring joy at a difficult time.
- Share your memories of my loved one. I really like knowing that he touched other lives and that other people miss him, too.
- When I lost my brother, I wanted to see every picture ever taken of him. Sometimes, when I go to a funeral, I make a copy of my favorite picture of the deceased and give it to family members. One young lady told me later that the picture I gave her was the only picture she had of her grandmother and she really cherished it.

Allow the person to grieve

- The best comment is "I'm sorry. I know you hurt and it's okay to cry," accompanied by a big shoulder to cry on.
- I don't remember anyone telling me it was okay to feel sad or lost, or to hate what breast cancer did to my mom's little body. It would have helped if someone allowed me to grieve.
- Be open and prepared in case his or her emotions are still raw and the person is in need of a shoulder to cry on or a listening ear. I just needed to cry, talk, and be understood or validated. Hugs and physical touch helped me. Now I ask people if they need a hug so they can say "no."

Be there for him or her

- Simply asking how he or she is doing and saying “I care” goes a long way. When my husband died fourteen years ago, it was helpful to me when friends called and left messages to “check in on me.” I would come home from work each night and just listen to the love and concern of dear friends. I felt no need to call back; I just listened.
- I’ve always been unsure about what to say to someone when he or she loses a loved one, but when the situation was reversed, I realized it was just being there that made the difference.
- I so appreciated those who just did things for me and didn’t ask me to “give them a call if I needed something.” Most of the time, I couldn’t think of what I needed or didn’t have the energy to make the call to ask.

What Not to Say

Don’t give unwanted advice

- My mother passed away last year after a fairly long illness. I struggled to get her the care and attention she needed while still managing my own life and career, so I hated when people I encountered said, “Why don’t you just do . . . ?” On several occasions, I thought I was going to come over the table at the next person who authoritatively asked me why I didn’t just do this or that to deal with the situation—like I was too stupid to think of the most basic, obvious solutions.
- After walking through two of the most significant losses in my life, I learned from the examples of those who responded to me with compassion and sensitivity instead of telling me to “Get over it and move on.” I learned that people don’t need your advice or “wisdom” when they are experiencing the pain of loss. They need someone to show compassion and concern.

Don’t place blame

- My precious little son died twenty-three years ago as result of a rare allergy to antibiotics. When handing back some official documentation, the lady behind the counter said to me, “Well, perhaps you will look after your other children better.” My heart was already rent apart, but when she made this comment, it was like she pulverized every aspect of me as a mother. At the time, I simply looked at the woman and walked away, unable to speak. It took me some time to recover, but I finally realized that she spoke out of ignorance, not knowing what to say to a grieving mother.

Don’t ignore the person

- What I found the most offensive were people who said absolutely nothing. I work every day with people who never said a single word, never acknowledged my loss. This I found unforgivable and still do.

Don’t tell him or her to be grateful

- When a close family friend wrecked her car on her way home from our house and her three-year-old son was killed, I wondered what to say to someone who had just lost a child. In my haste to find the right words, I said that it could have been worse if her daughter had been with her. The look in her eyes was enough to let me know how insensitive my remark was. I haven’t forgotten the pain I caused at that moment, but have used that memory to help guide my conversations with others who have lost loved ones.
- When my father died of colon cancer at age sixty, one woman commented to my mother, “At least you don’t have any young children at home.” What difference does it make? Fifteen is too young to lose a father. I still remember that comment and I am now fifty-two years old.

Don’t obligate those who are grieving

- Avoid anything that carries any additional expectation, obligation, comparison, or anything that makes it about you (the giver) rather than him or her (the recipient).
- If I’m hurting, I don’t want to get tangled up in a conversation that may or may not hurt me more than I am already hurting. To me, the best comments are those that require a simple “Thank you.” For example, “I was sorry to hear about your grandmother, I know how much she meant to you.”

Don’t ask for details

- Instead of asking about me, my mom, or my family, people asked how my father died. I thought those questions were insensitive. It’s not a matter of how someone died; it’s a matter of how you are dealing with the loss. Those details are personal information and if someone wants to share it, he or she will.
- During my wife’s long illness, we coached friends not to ask “How are you?” as a standard greeting. This forces the patient to choose between “I’m fine, how are you?” and a discussion of the medical treatments. It’s better that friends provide a positive change by simply stating, “How nice to see you!”

Don't say, "He's in a better place"

- When I lost my father last year, I noticed others were trying to rationalize his passing by telling me that he is now "better off" or "in a better place." Although it may have been true, my emotional state didn't want to deal with these rationalizations.
- When I lost my seven-month-old daughter, I didn't want any religious speech about how she was in a better place or that God had a plan for her. I just wanted (and still want) people to grieve with me.

Don't share personal stories

- For me, the worst comments come in the form of a personal opinion or story that is loosely related to my experience and closely related to that person's inability to control what comes out of his or her mouth. "Gosh, I'm so sorry to hear about your aunt. I had an uncle who died of cancer, but his death was much worse." Telling someone you are sorry he or she lost a loved one is a very bad time to give a little "one-up" story.
- The worst part was when people told me what I suffered wasn't that bad or when they shared how the death of their pet, their divorce, or loss of a job equated to the death of my spouse. Losing your dog, though traumatic, is not like losing your spouse.
- When a well-meaning friend said, "My grandma had cancer for years, until she died." Our response was, "It's not helping me to hear that kind of story right now. I'm sorry for your loss, but can we talk about something else?"

Don't tell him or her to start over

- When our first child was stillborn, one of the most hurtful comments was, "Don't worry, you'll have another baby." Children—and people of any age, for that matter—are not replaceable! It was important that people understood our child was a unique human being and we had the right to grieve the loss. No matter how many more children we have, we will always miss our firstborn son and wonder what kind of person he would have been.
- When I had a miscarriage many years ago, several folks made the comment, "It is for the best. You can try again." This discounted the real loss we felt and the grief we were going through.
- At my father's post-funeral luncheon, a friend told my stepmother that she would find herself dating again before long. I could hardly believe the insensitivity of the comment

and my stepmother has struggled to forgive this person and realize it was an awkward attempt at helping her remember that in time, the pain will subside and life will take on a more routine feeling again.

How to Respond to Insensitive Comments

Remember that everyone is different

- When my mother passed away twenty years ago, my father made it very clear that each family member would come to terms with our mother's passing in different ways and times. He went on to say that "Grieving is a process and not an event. Each person had a different relationship with Mom and all of you have a different relationship with each other. We may say things without thinking them through, so please be sensitive and know there may be misunderstandings. Everyone needs to be patient with each other because we really don't know what the other person is truly thinking." When Dad followed ten years later, we knew how to handle ourselves and the time we spent together was a blessing in spite of the loss.
- I learned that we all have our own filters, our own points of view, and that judging someone else's attempts at dealing with these situations may be a disservice. Life doesn't prepare us well to respond to the pain others are experiencing. Most people are not meaning to be hard-hearted; sometimes they are just trying to protect themselves from feeling.

Be honest about your pain

- When asked how my dad died, I would tell the person who asked that I'd rather not discuss it but that we were doing as well as could be expected.
- When faced with insensitive comments, perhaps you could respond, "We all wish circumstances had not led to this end. I am not focusing on how my husband died, but that he is now gone. Your comments on how and why he died do not change the fact that I have lost my husband and my world has changed."

Write a script

- I faced a significant loss in 2009 when my husband of twenty-five years passed away. When faced with insensitive questions, I developed a script that said all that needed to be

shared: “He died of natural causes but suffered a great deal the last few years of his life. He is at peace now.”

Be honest when comments are hurtful

- My mother died recently. While we weren’t particularly close, I loved her very much and miss her dearly. Every time this subject came up in a conversation with my boss, she would say, “I know you weren’t very close to your mom . . .” It was time for a crucial conversation, so I asked to meet with her. I expressed to her how much I appreciated her support through my bereavement. This made her feel good that I recognized her good intentions. I then asked her if I could request something of her that would be very important to my healing process. I said, “Could you please not mention that I wasn’t very close to my mom. I know you mean well, but it makes me feel bad and right now I want to focus on the good parts of our relationship.” It was a great lesson for both of us.
- One experience I found hurtful was when my close neighbors said nothing to me or my children about our loss. About a week later, I shared this hurt and bewilderment with my neighbor. She said she thought she was respecting my privacy, that she wouldn’t have wanted people to “pry” into her grief, and that she had planned to speak with me a little later.
- When responding to insensitive comments, state how you feel, then tell your story and state your path. Say something like “Thank you, but right now I really feel sad. My _____ meant a lot to me and I need some time to express my sadness.” If the person expressing concern is someone close to you, then tell him or her exactly what you need him or her to do to support you during this time. If it is someone not so close to you, simply say “Thank you” and move on.

Master your story

- Most people fear death more than anything and the vast majority simply do not know how to react or what to say. When they try to say something supportive, it often comes out wrong. My advice is to appreciate that he or she has made the effort and has tried in his or her own way to be comforting. At least he or she has connected with you when it is actually much easier to avoid you and keep a distance. I have had many inappropriate things said for all of my losses, but they have all been appropriate in that they have come from caring, loving people with the best of intentions.
- I try to remember that people want to be helpful and don’t mean to be hurtful. Most of them haven’t experienced all the losses I have and can’t imagine the pain—nor would I want them to have these experiences.

- When others are insensitive, don’t take it personally. Try to understand that they don’t mean any harm. They just don’t know what to do. Make this the new story you tell yourself.

Realize that it takes time

- After my miscarriages, I read a booklet that described grief like the waves of the sea. At first, we are engulfed by grief and over time, the waves ebb less and less and the emotions are not so strong. However, the waves of grief can swallow you unexpectedly at any time—in the grocery store, at a school event, when you drive by a place that brings back memories of your loved one. Understanding this helped me realize I was normal when I had trouble facing dark days.

For more advice on speaking up in difficult situations, visit the Crucial Skills blog at www.crucialskills.com.