

What to Say, What to Do: Suggested Ways to Support Someone Who is Grieving

WHAT TO SAY

INSTEAD OF SAYING

"I'm sorry" or "Everything happens for a reason" or "They're in a better place."

This can be perceived as impersonal to the griever and may contradict their beliefs. They may wonder, "What are you sorry about?" "What was the reason?" "Better without me?"

"I know how you feel" or "I understand exactly what you are going through."

Saying this may cause the person to feel that you are devaluing their individual grief. Very early on, grievers find it difficult to hear about someone else's grief experience.

"At least he/she lived a long, happy life."

This message can be misperceived because regardless of how long the person lived, there is still a death to grieve. Additionally, the phrase is overused and seems impersonal.

"You should get over it" or "You should get back to work as soon as you can."

Grievers are often given unsolicited advice. Remember that there is no "right" way to grieve. Grief is personal and will be different for each person.

TRY SAYING

"My condolences" or "I am so sorry to hear about your _____'s death"

Saying this acknowledges the person's experience and gives them an opportunity to talk about the person who died or how they are feeling.

"I can only begin to imagine what you are going through and how you are feeling."

This statement demonstrates that you are truly focusing on the griever and their unique process. Ask them what it is like for them, rather than assuming you know what they are feeling or thinking.

"I'm not sure what to say, but I am here. We can talk if you want or I can just be here with you."

Though it can sometimes feel uncomfortable to sit with someone in silence, it may be exactly what the person needs.

"How are things going for you today? I remember that today marks _____ the amount of time since he/she died."

There are a wide variety of physical, emotional, cognitive, behavioral and spiritual responses to grief. What is right for one person may not suit someone else.

WHAT TO DO

INSTEAD OF DOING THIS

Waiting for the griever to call you and ask for what they need.

When someone is grieving, it can be difficult for them to recognize what they want or need and even more difficult to ask for help.

When the griever is forgetful, confused or angry, don't take it personally.

It is natural for someone who is grieving to forget things easily or seem angry, even if this is uncharacteristic of their previous behavior.

Giving your suggestions and ideas for coping.

Sometimes the person you are trying to help needs time alone or simply to be listened to more than hearing what you think is best for them.

Not mentioning the person who died because it might upset the griever.

This is likely to make the griever feel even more alone in their grief. They often ask "Am I the only one who remembers the person who died?"

Posting immediate condolences on social media.

It is important to check in with the family of the person who died before posting on social media so as to not reveal sensitive information without their permission.

TRY DOING THIS

Take the initiative and do something for them.

Offer to come over for a visit, bring them something to eat, or take them out. If you see something that needs to be done, ask their permission and do it!

Help the griever to remember important appointments, projects, and events.

Grieving can be an all-consuming process. Compassion and patience is key. A friendly reminder phone call or an offer to accompany them to an appointment may be very welcomed.

Be attentive and respectful of the griever's feelings and wishes.

Be an active listener by supporting them where they are in their grief process. Try and be completely present and open when listening.

Mention their name and share your memories.

Whether the death was recent or long ago, mention the person. If you know that there is an important life-cycle event approaching, be aware that this may bring about a strong grief reaction. Sharing memories can bring tremendous comfort.

Take extra care in word choice and in the timing before posting condolences.

Consider what you are going to post and what you will say, as a significantly larger audience will be privy to your words. You may want to follow up your post with a phone call to the family and friends, offering comfort and a space to talk if needed.