
INTERNATIONAL GRIEF INSTITUTE

RESILIENCE

RX™

WHAT TO SAY & DO TO HELP

Self care techniques for the bereaved

The science behind why they work and how to implement them after loss



An iCare Aftercare™ resource
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WHY IT MATTERS

It's hard seeing someone we love in emotional pain after loss, and our natural tendency is to try to fix what appears broken. Although it's human nature to communicate using words, well intentioned statements can backfire in the emotional volatility of the moment.

Learning which statements are helpful can help increase your confidence level when walking with the bereaved. Listed here is a compilation of what to say (and not to say) from the book, *Grief Diaries: How to Help the Newly Bereaved* (AlyBlue Media, 2016).

WHAT TO SAY

- ✓ "S/he was a wonderful person and will be greatly missed."
- ✓ "S/he was very special to me, too. I'm so very sorry."
- ✓ "I heard that feeling crazy is common."
- ✓ "When you need to talk, I'm a good listener."
- ✓ "What was your loved one's favorite color/food/movie?"
- ✓ "I can't imagine what you're feeling."
- ✓ "Your loved one was a special person and will be greatly missed."
- ✓ Ask him or her to share a story about their loved one.
- ✓ Offer comforting song lyrics, poems, quotes, or scriptures.
- ✓ "My heart hurts for you."
- ✓ "I'm going to the grocery store. Do you need milk?"
- ✓ "I'll take the kids to soccer practice."



When words just won't do, simply listen, hug, and repeat. -LYNDA CHELDELIN FELL

WHAT TO KNOW

- ✓ Crying is an important part of healing.
- ✓ Lethargy and exhaustion are normal physical responses to emotional pain.
- ✓ Forgetfulness and brain fog are normal cognitive responses.
- ✓ Change in eating and sleeping habits are normal behavioral responses.
- ✓ Trying to fix someone else's pain interferes with the growth of their natural resilience.
- ✓ Active listening without interruption or judgment is the best way to help.

WHAT NOT TO SAY (AND WHY)

“How are you? Are you okay?”

This statement ignores the obvious and demands an answer. Suggestion: “I’ve been thinking of you, how are you feeling today?” This invites the bereaved to open up.

“I understand how you feel.”

This statement tends to dismiss the intense emotions and is inflammatory. Suggestion: “I have absolutely no idea how you feel. But please know I have a good ear for listening and an available shoulder for hugs.”

“Time heals all wounds.”

Time doesn’t heal the pain. Instead, over the years coping skills become stronger. Suggestion: “I’ve been thinking of you. Please know I have a good ear for listening and an available shoulder for hugs.”

“It will get better every day.”

Grief isn’t a chronological process. One day can be good, but the next two might be very hard. Suggestion: “Some days will be better than others. When you’re having a rough day, call and I’ll bring you coffee.”

“Call if you need anything.”

The brain’s stress hormones cloud logical thinking. The bereaved also fear being a burden. Suggestion: “I’m going to the grocery store for toilet paper. Are you getting low?” Be specific, but not pushy.

“At least s/he isn’t suffering.”

One’s own suffering snuffs out all logic as to why the bereaved should be glad that their loved one can’t feel pain. Suggestion: “I have absolutely no idea how you feel. But please know I have a good ear for listening and strong shoulder for hugs.”

“God must have needed him/her.”

No matter how steadfast one is in his or her beliefs, a profound loss often triggers an examination of why our faith didn’t protect our loved one. Suggestion: “Just know that I’m praying for you. And I have a good ear for listening and strong shoulder for hugs.”

“You need to stay strong,” or “You are so strong!”

Both of these evoke guilt for wanting to cry. Suppressed sorrow leads to complications that not only hinder the mourner’s ability to recover, but creates confusion over why they feel so weak. Suggestion: “You don’t need to stay strong. You need to grieve.”

“I miss him/her as much as you do.”

This dismisses the mourner’s sorrow and implies competition for the loss. Suggestion: “I miss them too.”

“It’s time to move on.”

This implies that you know what’s better for the mourner than they do. Rushing through it can hinder long-term recovery. Suggestion: None.

“We all lose someone at some point,” or “Loss is a part of life.”

While both statements are true, they lack compassion and dismiss one’s right to move through the bereavement process. Suggestion: “Loss is so terribly hard!”

“They would want you to be happy.”

This statement generates guilt when feeling happy isn’t possible. Suggestion: None.

