

Grieving: What to Say, What Not to Say

By Gail Rink

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In my last column, I made some suggestions about how to write a sympathy card. I wanted to take this a step further by addressing actual contact with the bereaved, either in person or on the phone. It is important to remember that although we have the best intentions when providing words of comfort, sometimes what we say can make the bereaved feel even worse.

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*Coping with loss,
embracing healing*



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Over the years, I have collected my dos and don'ts for finding the right words to say to a person grieving the loss of a loved one. Many tend to avoid those in mourning because they are afraid of saying the wrong things. Reaching out to a grieving relative or friend is often essential to their coping, however.

To help us support those suffering a loss, here are a few suggestions I have for offering words of sympathy. Let's start with the "don'ts."

Don't say ...

- "I know how you feel." Even if you've experience a loss, remember that we all grieve differently and deal with the pain in different ways. Loss is personal and very intimate.
- "Call me if you need anything," or "Let me know if I can help in any way." People who are grieving are likely not the ones who will reach out to you. Instead, you should offer more specific help, such as buying groceries or driving him or her somewhere. Close friends can continually check in and delegate tasks to others.
- "Don't cry, it will get better." Some people need to cry to let out their emotions and feel at ease. Deep down they know it will get better eventually, but we can't stop their grief right away.
- "It was God's will" or "God knows best." Regardless of faith, these words are not always welcome in the grieving process. Be very sensitive. Some people may be offended thinking that God ordered the death.
- "It was her/his time to go." You may feel this way, but hearing this doesn't make it any easier when you have recently lost someone. Instead, ensure them that it wasn't their fault or in their control, if appropriate.
- "He/she is in a better place now." Grieving friends and family often feel that the "better place" is home with them.
- "He/she wouldn't have wanted you to feel this way." Although this may be true, it makes the bereaved feel guilty for grieving. We should all feel free to grieve how and when we want to.
- Do not avoid the subject or act as if nothing has happened. Grieving is a healing process.

Do say ...

- "My condolences to you and your family."
- "I am so sorry for your loss."
- "He/she will be deeply missed."
- Share an insightful or fun — not necessarily funny — memory of the deceased.

A few more suggestions:

Allow those in mourning to speak about the deceased and don't try to change the subject if you

feel uncomfortable.

- The most important support is to simply be available to listen.
- Remember to let them grieve at their own pace; don't force them to talk if they don't want to.
- Express your words with a card or note. Acknowledging the death brings great comfort to the bereaved.

Let me leave you with one final thought; that no matter what you say, your intention and love will be felt.

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