

Tips For Talking With A Grieving Person . . . ⁱ

What NOT to say . . .	What to say instead . . .
<p><i>How are you doing?</i> What the person may hear is, “Please tell me you’re doing ok, because it’s uncomfortable if you say you’re not doing well.” When faced with this question, people are more likely to respond with “fine” or “OK,” rather than really communicating their feelings.</p>	<p><i>When someone we love dies, it can be really tough. How has it been for you?</i> This acknowledges that what they are going through <i>right now</i> is very painful. Don’t gloss over their feelings—let them have the chance to grieve fully and without judgment.</p>
<p><i>They’re in a better place.</i> During such a confusing and personal time, it’s better to be cautious than assume a belief system that the griever might not subscribe to. This phrase can also seem to de-emphasize the pain he or she feeling at the moment.</p>	<p><i>I’m sorry you’re suffering.</i> Certainly the person is glad their loved one is not suffering anymore, but it doesn’t make the pain any different. Focus on the person who is experiencing pain at that moment.</p>
<p><i>Please let me know if there’s anything I can do for you.</i> Everyone reaching out with offers of support can be overwhelming. It also puts the responsibility on the bereaved to reach out for help.</p>	<p><i>I’ll come over to do a few loads of laundry, or I’ll drive carpool for the next month . . .</i> People are more willing to accept support if it’s specific rather than a wide-open offer.</p>
<p><i>You can always . . .</i> If someone loses a partner or a child, and you might tell them that he or she can always get remarried or have another child, thinking that you’re helping them to see the silver lining. But to the bereaved it can sound like you’re suggesting a loved one is replaceable. This plays on one of the biggest fears: that they will somehow forget that person and that they’ll not be as important in their life in the future.</p>	<p><i>Tell me about your loved one.</i> When dealing with the present pain of loss, it can be hard to look towards a future that’s full of unknowns. Help to focus on the memories by asking specific questions and being an active listener.</p>
<p><i>I know how you feel.</i> Though everyone will at some time experience loss, it is an overwhelmingly personal experience. You’re never truly able to know how someone experiences the loss, and claiming that you do can feel invalidating.</p>	<p><i>I can imagine how you’re feeling.</i> This gives the person a chance to identify how he or she feels, rather than speaking for him or her.</p>
<p><i>This all happens eventually.</i> Everyone does experience death and loss as a part of life, but this perspective might minimize the actual loss at that moment. This phrase is often tossed around when people lose their parents.</p>	<p><i>You must really miss them.</i> The loss of a loved one is likely the source of pain—focus on that, rather than brushing it aside as a non-negotiable aspect of life.</p>
<p><i>She would have wanted it this way.</i> Unless the person planned for his or her funeral, there is now way to know his or her preferences would have been. Speaking for the deceased may invite unnecessary quarrels between friends and relatives, who all have different relationships and views of what the deceased would have deemed appropriate.</p>	<p><i>I’d like to honor them this way.</i> Tie your memorials to your actual knowledge base. Tap into your memories and information about the person, and acknowledge that it symbolizes the relationship you two shared, rather than the whole person.</p>
<p><i>You’re handling this better than I expected.</i> They might just be putting on a happy face. Your surprise might reinforce the idea that he or she shouldn’t be suffering the loss of a loved one.</p>	<p><i>You might not be feeling great, but that’s ok.</i> Let the person have complete freedom to feel how he or she wants—even if time has passed since the loved one’s death, it is comforting to acknowledge that each moment without them is difficult.</p>
<p><i>Nothing at all.</i> You’d be surprised how many people never reach out because they’re very uncomfortable.</p>	<p><i>Remember when?</i> One of the most helpful things you can do for a grieving person is share a memory of his or her loved one—even if you feel like you’re not in the inner circle. You’re giving them a perspective on that person that they’d never otherwise get the chance to have.</p>

ⁱ Liz Steelman – March 15, 2016