

A 4-PART BASIC GUIDE

*What to Say,
What to Do,
And How to Help*

**For Grievers & For Those
Who Want To Support**

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As a psychotherapist who has worked with many grieving clients, and as someone who's experienced loss, I can't tell you how many times I've been asked by people who want to help: "What do I say? What can I do?" There are so many things that can be said about this subject, but I believe these are essential things to know when someone is newly grieving.

- I. Inappropriate Comments, Advice, and Awkward Situations**
- II. Even The Small Things Count**
- III. The Importance of Support**
- IV. It's Not About You. It's About Them.**

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I. Inappropriate Comments, Advice, and Awkward Situations

If you are grieving:

One of the most helpful pieces of advice I received came from a close friend. On the day my husband Jim died, she said, "People will say things to you that you won't believe. Try not to let it bother you. It's because they don't know what to say." It was valuable to remember this in the long hours standing in the receiving line during four separate wakes. This advice is helpful to remember as time goes on. Months and years later, people will still say things that leave you stunned, shocked, or hurt.

One of my clients came to my office and held-in tears overflowed as soon as she walked in. Her mother had died about four months before and one of her co-workers asked when she was going to be ready to move on. We all grieve in our own way, in our own time. Don't let anyone tell you how you should grieve.

If someone you know is grieving:

As I stood with Jim's family in the receiving line at one of the wakes, with his open casket nearby, an older woman said, "Oh, honey, you're young. You'll meet someone else and marry again." I could taste blood as I bit my lip to not scream. I know she meant well, but don't ever say that to someone as she's standing near her husband's casket two days after he's died. And if someone's child has died, don't say thank god you still have other children.

A former work colleague, someone I had not seen for a few years, said, "Wow, you look great, I mean, even with all that's happening. When the dust settles, do you want to go for a drink?" In disbelief, with my face swollen and red from tears and the strain of standing up when all I wanted to do was collapse and crawl into a hole, I couldn't help myself. I said, "The dust will never settle." I couldn't look at him again and recoiled as he tried to embrace me.

If you don't know what to say, a simple "I'm sorry" is fine. Please don't feel the need to "fill in" or grasp for something to say unless it is genuinely sympathetic, compassionate, and supportive. Not knowing what to say, and saying nothing more than "I'm sorry" or a hug of support is hugely preferable to awkward words that fluster both you and the griever.



II. Even The Small Things Count

If you are grieving:

Let people help you.

If someone you know is grieving:

If the loss is new, in the first few weeks, do more than ask, "What can I do?" Call on your way to the grocery store, asking if there is anything you can pick up. Make a meal and drop it off. Ask if there are any errands that need to be done. If someone has children, offer to take them for a day or an evening to give someone private time to grieve.

If you see them on the street or in the store, walk up and let them know you care. You can say, "You are in my thoughts", or, "How are you doing today?" Every day is different. Some days are better than others. If they don't want to engage, they will let you know. Please respect that too, and continue to try to offer support at another time.



III. The Importance of Support

If you are grieving:

Let people support you. And if you need time alone to feel your feelings, to wail, to rage, pound a pillow, whatever it is you need to do, do it. If you have children, ask someone to babysit. Or maybe you don't want to be alone, and that's fine too. Whatever feels right to you. And remember, this will change, from day to day, minute to minute, week to week.

If someone you know is grieving:

In the first few weeks and months, people called me every single night. Almost like a tag team of family and friends, just to check in and make sure I was all right. They would listen when I wanted to talk. I didn't always want to, but knowing people cared and were there for me meant so much.

Close friends would frequently stop by to check in and would understand if I didn't want to engage. I often wouldn't want to - so please understand this about people grieving. We want and need your love and support. But, at times, we may not be very responsive to your efforts.

So be there for us and let us know it - call, stop by, show you care, but understand, some of us need space to grieve privately. Yet knowing someone is there, waiting, with love and acceptance matters more than you know.

If you are grieving:

I received hundreds of letters and cards, Some of them from people I didn't know, but who knew Jim. They shared their memories of him: of the difference he made in their lives, kind gestures, kind words, or a funny story. I read each one, over and over. It meant so much and brought me comfort. It was wonderful to see how special others thought he was, too.

If someone you know is grieving:

Take the time to send that card or letter. It matters more than you know. A sympathy card is fine, but if you have a special memory to share, that will be comforting and special. Some people don't send cards because they don't know what to say. Again, "I'm sorry" is meaningful and supportive.



IV. It's Not About You. It's About Them

If you are grieving:

Do you feel the need to censor or suppress yourself because you're concerned how someone else may feel? Has someone avoided you or doesn't know what to say and becomes uncomfortable if you talk about your loved one? When someone says something hurtful or inappropriate, try not to take it personally - it's about them, not you. It's about their own fear, their own discomfort, and not knowing what to say.

Surround yourself with those who will listen and hold the space with you. Who can be completely present with you while you talk about your loved one, about this new life you're living and how hard it is to navigate; about your fears, your new rituals, what help you still need, about anything and everything. The freedom to be just who you are and where you are at this very moment.

If someone you know is grieving:

Know that griever live in a world of Before and After - learning how to live with huge holes in their lives. There is no compass or map or how-to manual to help navigate the world of After. If you aren't sure what to say, a simple "I'm sorry" is fine. Acknowledging the loss is what's important. This is kind and supportive.

A gentle clasp of hand, a hug, sharing a kind thought like, "I think of him often and miss him" is welcomed. Or, "You and your family are in my prayers." We want our loved ones to be remembered and missed and want to talk about the person we love, whose love is still alive, carried in our hearts. Whose energy is still all around us, and always will be. We don't want to be concerned we might cause others discomfort because we still talk about the person we love. All the time. We want to know it's okay. Because it is!

At the very least, don't avert your eyes. Don't walk away. Don't treat us as if we're invisible. Hold that space for us. Listen, even if we tell the same story over and over.

♥ This is an excerpt from my book
"You Are Not Alone: A Heartfelt Guide to Grief, Healing, and Hope"
Learn more at www.debbieaugenthaler.com/book

*with love and light,
Debbie*

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