

WHAT TO SAY INSTEAD



No matter how familiar you are with grief, it's still hard to know what to say when a death occurs. It's human nature to fall back on the clichés and platitudes we've grown up hearing. If you've ever found yourself relying on automatic responses, you're not alone. Most of the time these sentiments come from good intentions and a desire to comfort. That said, here are some common ones that often miss the mark with grieving children and families, along with suggestions for what to say instead.

"You must be..."

Assuming how someone is feeling can be affirming (if you assume correctly), but more often it sets an expectation for their reactions that may or may not be true. If someone doesn't feel the way you think they do, they might experience guilt or shame for not grieving the right way.

Better options:

How is your grief today?

How is it affecting you lately?

"At least..."

As Brené Brown illustrates in her famous [video](#) about sympathy vs. empathy, any sentence that starts with "At least" is likely not empathy. Examples include: "At least you have other children." "At least you can get remarried." "At least you were young, you probably don't remember much about your mom." These statements minimize the grieving person's experience and push them to focus on the positive.

Better options:

I appreciate all that you share with me.

What has this been like for you?

What have you noticed about being a widow at 30?

"It's all part of a bigger plan."

Any attempt to put meaning on someone else's experience assumes everyone shares the same world view. Instead, invite those who are grieving to talk about what they think and feel.

Better options:

I'm here to listen.

What's your sense about what happened?

"I know how you feel."

Grief is extremely individual. Even people in the same family, who shared the same relationship with the person who died, may think and feel differently. While you might want to let them know you get it, doing so puts the focus on you and can close the door on the grieving person's unique experience and connection with the person who died.

Better options:

What has it been like for you?

My dad died too, but I know grief is so different for everyone. How was Father's Day for you?

"You're so strong."

This assumes you know how the person is doing, without knowing what's happening beneath the surface. It also leaves little room for grief to be messy and look like the complete opposite of strong.

Better options:

I appreciated you emailing us with what happened. It was so helpful to know the story. How was it for you to do that?

You said you went back to work/school, how has that been?

It seems like a lot of people in your family turn to you for help. Who do you go to when you need support?

“Don’t feel that way.”

If a grieving child or adult is talking about an emotion that is particularly painful to hear, the instinct can be to take it away in the hopes of making them feel better. Resist the urge! Trying to wash away someone’s difficult emotions can give the message they are wrong or bad for feeling how they feel. By avoiding, “Don’t feel that way,” you communicate that you are a safe person to talk with and can handle listening to how they are feeling.

Better options:

You’re really struggling with feeling guilty.

Seems like you have a lot of regrets about the last few days with your dad. I’m here if you want to share more.

“They would want you to be happy/They would be so proud of you.”

Depending on your relationship with the person who died, you might have some sense of how they would respond to a situation, but it’s best to leave those conclusions to the person you’re trying to support.

Better options:

I’m so proud of you for graduating high school. What do you think your dad would say if he were here?

Sounds like you’re struggling with how to feel about getting married without your brother there. It can be so tough to plan something celebratory when you’re grieving.

“Let me know if there’s anything I can do.”

Offering to help in this way puts the responsibility on the grieving person to identify what they need and reach out to ask. Instead, make specific, tangible offers of support. It’s hard for pretty much everyone to accept help, so reassure them it’s okay to turn down your offer. Keep checking in as support tends to disappear after the first few weeks.

Better options:

I’m on my way to the grocery store, can I pick something up for you? You said your kids love juice boxes in their lunches, I can grab a few packs.

You mentioned you’re having trouble sleeping. I keep my phone on all night, so if it’s 2 a.m. and talking would help, I’m happy to pick up.

This list is a just a start. Since grief is different for everyone, a good motto to fall back on is: Ask, don’t assume. Remember too that intention matters. Aim for creating space for someone to talk about their experience rather than trying to fix, change, or take away their pain.



The National Grief Center
for Children & Families

Our Mission

Dougy Center provides grief support in a safe place where children, teens, young adults, and their families can share their experiences before and after a death. We provide support and training locally, nationally, and internationally to individuals and organizations seeking to assist children in grief.

Dougy Center Bookstore/Resources

Dougy Center has been helping children, teens, young adults and their parents cope with death since 1982. Our practical, easy-to-use materials are based on what we have learned from more than 55,000 Dougy Center participants. To order online, visit dougy.org or dougybookstore.org, or call 503.775.5683.