

Responding in the Moment

What are helpful things to say to someone going through a loss? Are there supportive questions I can ask to understand how they are feeling about it? What are some things I should prepare for during an encounter? How do I start a conversation, and how do I say goodbye? What are things I should never say, even if they are meant to be helpful?

Empathic communication is of utmost importance during every interaction with someone who is grieving. When you first learn someone you are talking with has had a loss, resist the urge to assume anything about how they are grieving or what they are feeling. Instead, take time to explore what the loss means to them and what their relationship was to the person who died.

Scenarios and Scripts

The following scripts are examples that promote a guided approach to communicating with the bereaved in a number of settings and situations. Although they are not meant to be read directly from the page, don't hesitate to rely on them if you are feeling uncertain. If you must refer to the scripts during an interaction with the bereaved, be sure you do not read the words or phrases in brackets. With practice, you can develop a toolbox of supportive communication skills.

Example 1: You work at the information desk in a long-term care facility. Someone arrives to visit a family member who has just died. You have to break the news. You could start by saying...

"I have something hard to tell you; I wish you were hearing this from someone else. [Name] died early this morning. *[Pause to allow for a response.]* Arrangements have been made for the body to be taken to [place]. The mortuary services will arrive in a couple of hours. If it would feel right to you, you can spend time in the room with [Name] now. This might be a lot to process right away. If you need more time, you can sit here. I can assist with any questions you have."

Example 2: You volunteer at a cancer treatment center. While visiting with a patient, they share the news that their treatment isn't going as well as hoped. You could start by saying...

"That must have been really hard to hear. I wish the news had been different." *[Continue to respond appropriately to what is being shared.]*

Example 3: Your business provides body transport for mortuary services in your area. You struggle with what to say when you arrive and when you leave. You could start by saying...

"Hello. I'm [Name]. I'm here to take [Name's] body to the funeral home. I understand they were your [e.g., partner, parent, child]. Is there anything that would be important for me to know about [Name]?" *[Continue to respond appropriately to what is being shared.]*

As you leave, consider saying...

"Before I go, is there anything you would like to send along with [Name] today? *[Pause.]* I promise to treat [Name's] body with dignity and care as long as I'm with them. If you have any questions or need anything else from me, here's my contact information. I'll be thinking of you."

Example 4: You work third shift in an emergency department. Key members of the support team (e.g., spiritual care, social work services) are not available during these hours. A patient arrives and is told they will miscarry. You take over care and discharge of the patient. You could start by saying...

"I want to understand how you are doing with this news that you will have a miscarriage. There is no right or wrong way to feel."

Responses will provide clues. You could say something like...

"Thank you for letting me know that. It helps us plan together for the next steps."

The patient may indicate this is a part of nature or a part of life. They still need appropriate relationship-based care. They may reveal they had not been invested in the pregnancy or were stressed out by it for one reason or another. Then you could say...

"Being relieved is something I have heard many times before. In light of these feelings, which of these options seems best for you?"

Or the patient may show strong attachment and use the word "baby" when talking about their loss. Still, the patient may have strongly attached to the pregnancy without thinking about it as a baby yet. In either case, offer rituals and other appropriate supports based on what they have shared. Because there is strong attachment, these patients likely experience this event as a profound loss. You could say...

"I can see this is really painful for you. I care about you, and I'm here to provide comfort and support. Have you thought about..."

Example 5: You work as a nurse in a clinic. During a routine health exam, you feel caught off guard when a patient shares they are not sleeping following the recent death of their mother. You could start by saying...

"That must be hard news to share, and I'm grateful you invited me into your story. I want you to know that people frequently struggle with sleep and other daily routines after someone close to them dies. Today, we're going to figure out how to help manage some of those challenges, especially your sleep."

Example 6: You lead a weekly grief support group. One member routinely dominates the conversation and takes the discussion off track. You need to end their tangent in a respectful way. You could start by saying...

"Thank you for sharing. I'll be holding that in mind as we continue to work through today's session content. We're going to move on to be sure we cover everything and everyone has an opportunity to share. For the same reason, I'll be jumping in if responses stray from the discussion prompt."

Example 7: You work as a guidance counselor in a school. A teacher is unsure how to support a student who is returning to school following the unexpected deaths of both their parents. The teacher asks how to best support the student. You could start by saying...

"I appreciate you sharing this with me. We both understand how trauma negatively affects a student's ability to engage in school. It takes a village to help kids through these times. I will be in contact with [Student's name] to create a schedule for sessions with me. You and I can also meet. I can share important, nonconfidential

information so you have a better understanding of [Student's name's] needs. I can also give you some appropriate language for providing support."

Go-To Helpful Things to Say

Here are some helpful things you can say as you support someone who is grieving:

- "I wish you were not going through this."
- "How are you doing with all this?"
- "What is most important to you right now?"
- "I wonder what you are thinking about."
- "Tell me about [Name]."
- "How did [Name] see themselves as a person? What were they most proud of?"
- "What are some things that made the relationship special to you?"
- "I know you have a lot going on right now. Can I check in with you next Tuesday at 2:00 p.m.?"
- "Help me understand how your family cares for someone who is dying."¹
- "What is important for me to know about how best to care for your loved one's body?"¹
- "Are there any ceremonies or rituals that you would like to participate in?"

Unhelpful Things to Say

Here are some things you may think would be helpful, but you should never say:

- "Your child is **in a better place**. This happened **for a reason**."
- "**At least her suffering is over**. You were **lucky** to have your mom **for so long**."
- "**Don't cry**. Things **will** get better."
- "The **best** thing for you now is to **move on** and **find closure**."
- "**Time will heal**."
- "It's **God's will**. **God wanted** [Name] with Him."
- "We did **everything we could**."
- "You're **young**; you'll find a **new partner**."
- "You can have **other children**."
- "**At least...**"
- "**I know how you feel**. When my sister died..."

The phrases listed here, while commonly used, can be hurtful to the person who is grieving. There are more helpful ways to say what you want to say. When you want to provide comfort, avoid using words that dismiss feelings or assign meaning. The bolded words in the examples assign meaning. Assigning meaning to the loss is the work of the griever.

Don't make it about you—your feelings, your relationship, your experience. When you center yourself, you can shut down the grieving person and their desire to share. Those who are grieving don't want to be told how to feel; they want to be heard.

¹ Limbo, R., & Kobler, K. (2010). The tie that binds: Relationships in perinatal bereavement. MCN The American Journal of Maternal/Child Nursing, 35(6), 316-321. [CE: 322-323]. doi:10.1097/NMC.0b013e3181f0eef8