What Not To Say to Someone Grieving a Loss, According to Experts

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Key Takeaways

- Grief is deeply personal, and common phrases can feel minimizing or unhelpful to someone who is grieving.
- The most meaningful support is being present, listening, and offering sincere, honest words.
- Grief has no timeline, so ongoing patience and support can make a lasting difference.

We've all been there; standing across from someone who's just lost someone they love, wanting so badly to say the right thing but feeling completely at a loss for words. We want to show up for them and make things better, but sometimes the words that come out don't land the way we hope.

"When we say the wrong thing, we're often trying to make ourselves feel better about someone's pain," says **Rebecca Feinglos**, a certified grief support specialist. "But grief isn't meant to be comfortable for anyone—not for the person experiencing it, nor for the people watching."

Phrases To Avoid

Research shows that losing a loved one is the **most significant source of stress** we experience, topping the list of life's most challenging events.[1] **Grief can be messy and painful**, and in our effort to comfort someone who's struggling, we can sometimes make things worse.

Here are some common phrases to avoid when someone is grieving.

1. “Everything happens for a reason.”

You may be simply trying to make sense of the situation, but to someone who’s grieving, this can feel like you’re minimizing what they’re going through.

The truth is that not all pain has a neat explanation. Not every loss makes sense. To someone in pain, no reason can feel good enough to justify losing their loved one.

2. “It was God’s will.”

Even if well-intended, this can feel invalidating or upsetting if the grieving person is **questioning their faith** or struggling to make sense of the loss.

It’s important not to speak from your own beliefs about death unless you're certain the grieving one shares those beliefs, says **Aimee Daramus, PsyD**, a clinical psychologist.

3. “I know exactly how you feel.”

Grief is deeply personal, and everyone's experience is unique. Even if you've lost someone, their grief is uniquely theirs, says Feinglos. “Avoid making comparisons.”

4. “At least you had time to prepare.”

This phrase, often said after an illness or long decline, implies that there shouldn’t be much pain. But knowing a loss is coming doesn’t necessarily make it hurt less.

5. “They’re in a better place.”

While this might align with your religious or spiritual beliefs, it may not align with theirs. Even if it does, it often brings little comfort in the moment—because more than anything, the person likely just wants their loved one here, with them, rather than elsewhere.

6. “They lived a long life.”

Even if this is true, it doesn’t make the loss hurt any less. Grief doesn’t get smaller just because someone was older.

7. "At least you have [other children/family members]."

This implies that one loved one can replace another and diminishes the significance of the person they lost.

8. “Be strong.”

This puts pressure on someone to hold it together when what they may need most is to fall apart.

9. "You need to move on."

Grief has no timeline, and telling someone to move on can sound like you want them to hurry up and forget the person, or replace them with something or someone.

Grievers integrate their loss; they don't simply "move on" from it.

10. "Just focus on the good memories."

This phrase attempts to dictate how someone should grieve. While good memories can be comforting, sometimes in early grief, they can intensify the pain of absence.

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Someone who has experienced a loss is **extremely vulnerable in their grief.** Their emotions are heightened, their world has been shaken, and what you say can either comfort them or unintentionally deepen their pain.

“Someone who’s grieving a loss is already carrying an impossible weight. The last thing they need is to feel like they're carrying it wrong,” says Feinglos.

But that's exactly what happens when well-meaning people say things like "Everything happens for a reason," or "At least they're not suffering anymore," or "You need to stay strong," Feinglos explains.

Rebecca Feinglos, grief support specialist

When we try to fix it, rush it, or wrap it up in neat explanations, we're essentially telling someone their grief should have an expiration date.

When someone is grieving, their memory of how people showed up—or didn't-tends to stick. A careless comment or empty platitude can become one more painful thing they carry. On the other hand, a few simple, thoughtful words and actions can bring warmth and comfort.

How to Support Someone Who's Grieving a Loss

Here are some ways to support someone who's grieving, according to the experts:

- **Just be there:** The most powerful, comforting thing you can offer someone who's grieving isn't advice or explanations—it's your presence, says Feinglos. Sit with them. Listen without giving advice.
- **Keep it simple and honest:** Sometimes the best support sounds surprisingly simple, says Feinglos. She recommends being honest and saying: "This sucks," "I'm so sorry this is happening," or "I don't know what to say, but I'm here." You don't need to say something profound-just something sincere.
- **Put yourself in their shoes:** Put yourself in the person's situation and try to think of what might make them feel better. "Try to say something that will comfort them, not what would comfort you in the same situation," says Daramus.
- **Don't say things for the sake of saying them:** Try not to offer polite lies, says Daramus. "If you can't say something nice about the deceased or you didn't know them, just focus on asking what you can do to help the person."

Feinglos adds, “If you realize you said something that wasn't helpful, it's never too late to circle back and say, ‘I've been thinking about our conversation, and I realize that might not have been what you needed to hear.’"

- **Respect their grieving style:** People grieve in different ways, says Daramus. Some people cry openly. Others cope quietly or keep busy. Avoid judging how they’re grieving. There’s no “right” way to mourn a loss.
- **Follow their lead:** Grief takes different forms on different days.[2] Some days the person will want to talk about their loss; other days they'll want you to help them think about literally anything else, says Feinglos. “Your job is to meet them wherever they are.”
- **Offer practical support:** Grief can make everyday chores feel overwhelming. Offer to help with any tasks, says Daramus.
- **Mark the hard dates:** Sometimes, the anniversary of when everything changed hurts more than the actual day it happened, Feinglos explains. The day they got the diagnosis. The day their loved one passed away. Their birthday or anniversary. “These dates can hit like a truck when everyone else has moved on. A simple ‘I'm thinking of you today’ can mean everything.
- **Check in repeatedly:** The initial wave of support often fades just when the chaos settles down and the grief starts to really set in, says Feinglos. Keep checking in weeks and even months later. Grief doesn’t follow a schedule. Long-term support makes a real difference.
- **Be patient:** Grief doesn’t have a timeline. It’s not so much a state as a process.[3] Don’t pressure the person to “move on” or “get back to normal.” Healing takes time, and what they need most is your understanding and patience.

Rebecca Feinglos

The goal isn't to make their grief go away-it's to help them feel less alone while they're learning to carry it.

There’s no perfect way to comfort someone who’s grieving but being thoughtful about what we say is a powerful place to start. Even if you’re not sure what to say, here's what matters: You tried and you showed up, says Feinglos. Supporting someone through grief can feel overwhelming, but you don’t need to have all the answers.

Source: **Very Well Mind**