

HELP DESK

How to console those in mourning



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By [Robert Weisman](#)

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It's OK to sit in silence with someone who has suffered a loss.

Asking grieving friends or neighbors if you can do something concrete, like mow their lawn or bring over dinner, is better than telling them to “call if you need anything.”

The most comforting thing to say may be the simplest: “I’m sorry.” Don’t say they’re strong, suggest things will get better, or recount how you felt when someone close to you died.

That’s just some of the advice Boston area grief counselors and religious leaders have for people navigating a common quandary: how to offer sincere and helpful consolation to those struggling with the death of a loved one.

Death in the aftermath of tragedy has figured prominently in American life in recent years, creating an almost constant spectacle of mourning. But for most people, grief takes place outside the public eye. Painful loss is an inescapable part of life — especially for the over-50 crowd, as illness begins to overtake friends, siblings, and spouses.

Yet many feel uncomfortable reaching out to the grieving. And these days, condolences can be conveyed through e-mails, texts, or Facebook. Is it fine to just leave a comment, or is that an easy way out?

“People in general are really weird about death,” said Betsey Driscoll, 49, a substitute teacher who lost both parents over the past 12 years. “They don’t know how to talk about it.”

Often, sharing a memory of the person who died can help; the more specific, the better. Shortly after her father died, Driscoll was touched when a fellow parishioner at her Chelmsford church described how her dad had been kind to the parishioner’s father, taking him to doctor’s appointments. “It was a nugget he shared that I didn’t know about my dad,” she said. “It was like a gift.”

Too often the impulse is to view grieving as a problem to be fixed, said Sue Morris, director of bereavement services at Dana-Farber and Brigham & Women’s Cancer Center in Boston. But, she said, “grief is something you can’t fix.”

It’s important to be aware of the profound changes that survivors are experiencing, said Beth Loomis, director of pastoral care at Mount Auburn Hospital in Cambridge.

“When we’re dealing with someone in grief, we’re dealing with someone in a transition they didn’t elect,” Loomis said. “They’ll never be the same again. Be patient, be quiet, listen a lot.”

Lisa D'Alessio, 51, of Reading, whose husband, Joe, died of kidney cancer last year, found comfort talking with others who had recently lost spouses at bereavement groups organized by Dana-Farber. "Just being with other people and hearing their stories was important," she said.

Those who approached her after Joe's death had good intentions, she said, and most of their gestures and sentiments were comforting — but not all of them.

"I didn't like hearing he was in a better place. That just didn't work. We liked him here," said D'Alessio, who recalled Joe's close bond with their children. "The 'moving on' and 'moving forward' thing didn't fly with me. . . . A part of me is going to be sad for the rest of my life."

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It also wasn't comforting when someone said they knew how she felt. "I don't think anyone knows what anyone else's grief is like," she said.

Most helpful were people who told her candidly, "I don't know what to say." That created an opening for a conversation. Others invited her to talk by saying, "I can't imagine what you're going through. Do you want to tell me about it?"

While some rush to assure the bereaved that things will gradually improve, D'Alessio found it more helpful, paradoxically, when a woman at her husband's wake quietly told her, "It's going to get worse before it gets better." That, alas, proved to be true.

Too many would-be consolers mistakenly avoid saying the name of their loved ones for fear of upsetting them, said the Rev. Patrick Ward, associate rector for pastoral care at Trinity Church in Boston.

"The thing that grieving people love the most is to be around people who aren't afraid to talk about the deceased," Ward said. "Often it's about asking the right question, asking open-ended questions: 'How do you feel? How has it been for you since Jim's death?'"

Even in the age of digital condolences, which can be heartfelt, some strongly favor the old-school approach — snail mail and visiting.

Sympathy notes are sometimes read from the pulpit at African-American funerals, said Dr. Lovern Moseley, a psychologist at Boston Medical Center.

“The handwritten note is a lost art,” she said. “But it’s meaningful for a lot of families.”

For those offering consolation, asking the bereaved what they need can be a good start, Moseley said. “It’s not one-size-fits-all,” she cautioned.

Being present with mourners is part of the Jewish tradition of “sitting shiva,” in which friends and family members visit the homes of the bereaved.

Rabbi Elaine S. Zecher, senior rabbi at Temple Israel of Boston, advises visitors to focus on the person who has suffered the loss. “We should start with the mourner, not with ourselves,” she said. “The idea is not to deposit your sadness onto your friend. It’s conveying that you’re acknowledging their sadness.”

And it’s important to check in with mourners in the days and weeks after the shiva, Zecher said. She suggested asking, “You could ask what would be helpful. ‘Do you want to take a walk? Do you want to see a movie?’ ”

Social media like Facebook can register community support. But it isn’t a substitute for a “real time” visit or phone call, said Sherry Turkle, a Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor and author of the book “Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age.”

“I have nothing bad to say about people getting comfort or support in any way,” Turkle said. “But let’s hope that some of these people sending these emojis are also making shiva calls and bringing food and sitting and talking. There are some things that a bereaved person has on their mind that can only be expressed in person.”

Joan Dolamore, 72, a retired dean of graduate and professional studies at Lasell College in Newton, has attended wakes in Ireland and found the camaraderie to be cathartic. “It’s a

very somber occasion, but people remember the person by telling stories,” she said. “There’s crying and there’s laughing.”

Communal gatherings are important because grief is isolating and disempowering, said Maria Trozzi, a national resiliency authority who founded the “Good Grief” program at Boston Medical Center to strengthen coping skills for families and communities.

“People don’t want a report card — ‘You’ve done so well, you’re so strong, you’ll be fine after you get through the holidays,’ ” Trozzi said. “They just want the support.”

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