

WHAT TO SAY...WHAT NOT TO SAY

When comforting the bereaved, it is not unusual to feel helpless. We are not sure what to say and may fall back on clichés.

True support does not mean “cheering a person up.” Rather, we are there to listen. This is a powerful gift. Many grieving people need to talk about the death over and over again in order to accept it. Others may need quiet solace. Allow for that silence. Your presence alone can be comforting

PLEASE DO NOT SAY	BECAUSE	SAY INSTEAD
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I know just how you feel. • Time heals. • Think about how happy he/she is in heaven 	<p>We cannot truly know what another person feels. Time alone does not heal pain. While the bereaved may believe in heaven, the pain of missing is still very real.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I can only imagine how you're feeling. • It sounds like this is a hard time for you. (Grievers say it can help to talk about the person who died.) • We care about him/her too. Can we talk?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be thankful he/she was not aware at the end. • He/she had a good life. • He/she would have wanted it this way. 	<p>We are justifying the death from our perspective, not from that of the bereaved. This discounts the griever's pain.</p> <p>Speaking for the deceased may invite unnecessary quarreling between friends and relatives with different viewpoints about the deceased's wishes.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It must have been difficult to watch him/her in pain. • I'm wondering if you're feeling empty. Is it hard to fill the time? • I'd like to honor them this way. (Tap into your memories and explain how it symbolizes the relationship you shared with the deceased.)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It will take two-three months to get over grieving. • Your grief will lessen in time. • You need to get on with your life. 	<p>These types of statements put limits on a person's grief. Each of us needs to grieve in our own way and time.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I hope others are not trying to hurry you through your grief. • I realize everyone grieves in their own way and time. • This must be a very hard time for you.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I know someone who had two loved ones die. • At least you have others in your family. • There are other people worse off than you. 	<p>These statements tend to trivialize the deep impact of the death of a loved one.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I wonder if you feel as if you will never get better. • It's good and normal to express your tears/pain.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • You shouldn't get so upset. • Your loved one wouldn't want you to be so sad. • You can't stay sad forever. 	<p>These statements cause guilt and deny the fact that expressing strong emotions is a necessary part of healing.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It must be hard being so sad. • How would your loved one comfort you if he/she were here right now? • Grief takes as much time as it takes.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • God needed him in heaven. • It was God's will. • God does not give you more than you can handle. • They're in a better place 	<p>These statements assume that we know God's will or know the grieving person's belief system.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It must be hard to understand why these things happen. • Sometimes things are just not fair, and there's no way to justify why this happened. • I'm so sorry you are suffering.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is better to put this painful experience out of your mind and get on with your life. • Just think happy thoughts. 	<p>You deny the grieving person the opportunity to deal with their pain. Remembering their loved one is part of healing.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I understand that for a while it is hard to think about anything other than your loved one who died. • I didn't know him/her, but it's a privilege to listen.



PLEASE DO NOT SAY	BECAUSE	SAY INSTEAD
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The death of your baby shouldn't be hard. You really didn't know him/her. Your mother was elderly, so it must be easy for you. She was just a good friend. Why are you so upset? 	<p>We can never judge the depth of the relationship one person has for another.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> When a baby dies, we lose part of our future. When a parent dies, no matter their age, we still lose a part of our history. No one can judge the depth of another's relationship.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> How are you doing? 	<p>The person is most likely hearing this: "Please tell me you're OK because it's uncomfortable if you say you're not doing well"</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> It's better to say: "It's really tough right now for you" and acknowledge that they are experiencing a painful time.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You're handling this better than I expected . You're so strong. 	<p>They may be putting on a happy face. Your surprise may reinforce the idea that they should be an example of strength to others.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You might not be feeling great, but that's ok. This allows the person to freely express their feelings, no matter how long it has been since the death.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You can always... 	<p>If someone loses a partner or child, and you suggest they can remarry or have another child, it is as if you are telling them their loved one is replaceable.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tell me about your loved one.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> This happens to everyone eventually. 	<p>This minimizes their loss.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> You must really miss them.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Please let me know if there is something I can do for you. 	<p>So many offers of help can be overwhelming and may put the burden on the bereaved to reach out for help.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "I'll come over to walk the dog" or "I'll drive carpool for you next month"; or "I can run to the drug/grocery store for you." Specific help is easier to accept.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nothing at all. 	<p>You'd be surprised how many people never reach out because they're uncomfortable and don't know what to say.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "Remember when?" One of the most helpful things you can do for the grieving person is to share a memory of his/ her loved one. Even if you are not in the inner circle, you give them a perspective they may otherwise never have.

Truly effective support does not depend on how much we say...but rather on being present and listening.