



GRIEF EDUCATOR CERTIFICATION COURSE

WEEK 2:

The Best & Worst Things to Say to Those in Grief



Notes from the Grief Educator Certification Course taught by Dr. David Page through The School of Grief.

Week 2: The Best & Worst Things to Say

Don't Tell Somebody to Move On

"If you tell somebody to move on, you're basically rejecting that person's emotional pain, saying, "Okay, that's enough, I don't want anymore, I don't want to be a part of it."

~ Robert Stolorow, Professor of Psychiatry at UCLA

Never tell somebody in grief to move on or get over it. When you do, you're rejecting the very thing the person needs most, a safe space to deal with their emotional pain. Asking someone to get over the person they lost, is like asking someone to no longer love the person that they lost. It isn't fair, it isn't realistic, and can be downright cruel.

A Response to Well-Meaning Friends

In today's world, we often share our grief feelings on social media. Kay Warren is the co-founder of Saddleback Church, a mental health advocate, and a dear friend. She was angry at what some people had said to her in her grief. She had a right to be angry. Her son, Matthew, died from suicide. Below is part of a Facebook post she wrote titled,

Don't Tell Me to Move On:

"As the one-year anniversary of Matthew's death approaches, I have been shocked by some subtle and not-so-subtle comments indicating that perhaps I should be ready to move on... I have to tell you – the old Rick and Kay are gone. They're never coming back. We will never be the same again."

"Because these comments from well-meaning folks wounded me so deeply, I doubted myself and thought perhaps I really am not grieving well (whatever that means). 'When are you coming back to the stage at Saddleback? We need you,' someone cluelessly said to me recently. Mourners are encouraged to quickly move on, turn the corner, get back to work, think of the positive, be grateful for what is left, have another baby, and other unkind, unfeeling, obtuse, and downright cruel comments."

"What does this say about us - other than we're terribly uncomfortable with death, with grief, with mourning, with loss – or we're so self-absorbed that we easily forget the profound suffering the loss of a child creates in the shattered parents and remaining children."

Within seven days, her post had gone viral with 3.75 million readers and 10,000 comments. Thousands of individuals shared stories of lost family members due to illness, suicide, or a tragic accident. They recounted the insensitivity of family and friends, and their own shame and guilt about their overwhelming grief. Kay's post is a good summary of what not to say to those in grief and why.

The Problem

We live in a grief illiterate society. As a grief educator and pastor, I am on a mission to change that by teaching about grief and equipping people with the necessary tools to comfort and guide others on their unique grief journeys.

The fact is, most Americans just don't know how to grieve. Knowing the right thing to say doesn't come naturally to us. We weren't born with that skill, and nobody ever taught us, so we never learned. And since we don't know how to grieve, we don't know how to respond to others in their grief.

We don't know what to say and not say. In addition, most of us haven't had much experience with people in deep emotional pain and it's not always apparent when we're helping or hurting them. This concept can be scary, awkward, and downright perplexing. What feels right and helpful for one person may be all wrong for another. Likewise, the timing of when you say something may make all the difference. Or you might be the right person to say something to a friend or family member, but the wrong person to say it to another.

3 TIPS FOR RESPONDING TO THOSE IN GRIEF

I will be the first to admit I haven't always said the right things to those in grief but I'm learning. I invite you to learn with me. Below are three tips for talking to someone in grief followed by my top ten list of the best and worst things to say to those in grief.

Tip: #1: It's Not About You

One of the greatest opening lines from a book came from Rick Warren, author of *The Purpose-Driven Life*, when he said, "It's not about you." Rick was referring to finding your purpose in life, but I want to apply it to what to say or not say to grieving people. Many people want to talk about how the grieving person's loss affects them. When someone shares their loss, it's important to listen and not to give your loss history. You may want to say, "Oh my gosh, my mother died last year, too. Let me tell you what happened." When your loved one dies, that's the only person you want to hear about. Now, it's completely okay to say, "Oh my gosh, I've dealt with loss myself and I really want to be here for you." That puts the attention back on them.

In responding to the loss of my daughter, I heard many people say, "Oh wow, Dave, I could never handle what you are going through." These people meant well but it was more about them than me.

Tip #2: Avoid Bright Siding and Toxic Positivity

When people are in pain, we naturally want to help soothe the pain and lighten the mood. In principle, it's a kind gesture, but in reality, it's never welcome. Be careful of bright siding and serving up toxic positivity. Bright siding is forced gratitude.

It sounds like this: "Aren't you glad they died so quickly?" "Be happy that she is at peace now." "Everything happens for a reason." Be fully present with someone in grief without trying to point out the silver lining.

"When life gives you lemons, make lemonade" is a phrase meant to encourage optimism in the face of adversity. Lemons suggest sourness or difficulty in life; when applied to grief, lemons could suggest sadness. Hence, the goal for many is to turn sadness into something positive.

But the way lemons are turned into lemonade is by sugarcoating them, making them seem more positive than they really are. Avoid sugarcoating someone's grief. Let them feel the sadness and pain that accompanies grief without trying to brighten things up.

Toxic positivity is positivity given in the wrong way, in the wrong dose, and at the wrong time. It sounds like this: "Cheer up!" "Buck up!" "Dig deep!" "Don't worry!" "Stop focusing on the negative!" "Try to have a better attitude!" "Remember, God never gives us more than we can bear." We often go overboard on positivity because we don't want people that we care about to feel bad. We sometimes say stupid things because we are uncomfortable in our own pain.

When you've lost a loved one, you're in a dark, raw place. Nothing anyone can say is going to cheer you up, especially conversations that begin with the words "at least." "At least she isn't suffering anymore." "At least he died doing something he loved." "At least she's in a better place."

If you're going to start off a sentence with "at least," just stop yourself. It's not going to be helpful. You're trying to force them to look at the positive when they're feeling horrible. Learn to respond and not just react by saying the first thing that comes to your mind. Self-reflection and awareness are key.

Tip #3: Listen Without Judging

Grief is a no judgment zone. There is no right way to grieve. It's an individual process. When I'm with someone whose loved one has died, I try to validate what they are feeling. Not to judge it or try to change it—just to acknowledge it fully.

Don't tell a grieving person how to feel. They may need to be vulnerable. They may need to cry for days on end. I feel honored when someone shares their pain and grief with me. The act of witnessing their vulnerability can bring the person out of isolation if the witnessing is done without judgment. It's not your job to stop their grief and pain and make them feel better. Just let them feel.

THE WORST THINGS TO SAY TO THOSE IN GRIEF

1. I know how you feel.

No, you really don't know how they feel after their loss, even if it's the same type of loss you've experienced. People think they can understand another's heartbreak, but the reality is I can't understand the loss you're going through. I can't understand your sorrow. However, I can come alongside you and be present with you in your pain.

2. At least she lived a long life.

Many people die young, so they reason that your loved one lived a long life, and therefore, you shouldn't feel that bad. Even if your mother passes away at 94 years old like mine did, it still hurts.

3. He is in a better place.

This may be true, and heaven is a wonderful place, but it's just not the right time to say it. The thought that someone's loved one is better off deceased and without them can feel cruel.

4. There is a reason for everything.

One of my favorite verses in the Bible is Romans 8:28, "And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him." I personally find great comfort in this verse and so do millions of others but it's just not the right time to say it.

5. Aren't you over him yet? He's been dead for a while.

Grief is not something that we get over even if it's been years since our loved one died. There is no closure in grief and there is no timeline for grief. Each person grieves differently and processes their grief uniquely over time.

6. You can still have another child.

This is often said to parents who have lost a child. It was said to me and Carrie numerous times. Biologically, we still could have had another child together, but we already had two other incredible children when Jackie died, and this was the last thing on our minds. It implied to me that Jackie was replaceable. My first death experience occurred when I was five years old when my hamster died. I loved my little hamster and cried a river of tears when he died because it hurt deeply. My dad went to the pet store the same day and bought me another hamster. Children aren't hamsters.

7. She was such a good person that God wanted her to be with him.

Sometimes people say, "God needed another angel." God doesn't need any more angels. Your loved one does not become an angel when they die. If God needed more good people in heaven, then why are some of us still here?

8. He brought this upon himself.

Maybe a loved one died from suicide or an accidental drug overdose. We don't know the whole story and to say, "He brought this on upon himself" is cruel and never welcomed.

9. She did what she came here to do, so it was her time to go.

Well, maybe she did but maybe she didn't. We don't know for sure. What I do know is that saying that isn't going to soothe someone's pain or help them in their grief.

10. Be strong for your family and dig deep.

Often people say, "Lean into God." It's good to lean into God but just not the right time to say it. One translation of saying, "Be strong for your family" is "Don't have those sad feelings." For many men when they are told, "Your family needs you to be strong," instead, they hear, "Don't grieve." As men, we've been taught not to cry or show our emotions. We all need to grieve, especially men. When parents express their grief openly it gives children permission to feel their grief feelings and to express them. Modeling our grief to our kids is one way they learn about grief.

Be Cautious of Religious Gobbledygook

After my daughter's diagnosis, our church staff and elders came over to our house to pray for my daughter's healing. It was a sweet moment. One staff member approached me after the prayer and said, "Dave, you don't have to worry because God showed me that he's going to heal your daughter and all you need to do is have faith." I so wanted to believe what he said, yet in my heart, I felt she may die as I observed her progressing in her cancer and knew that unless God intervened, she would die.

Please be cautious of what I call religious gobbledygook responses. This refers to pompous, pretentious, and nonsensical jargon. Be careful with religion. I say that as a person of faith and as a pastor. Imposing your religious beliefs, feelings, or wishes on others can be hurtful. This is an extreme case of what not to say but it illustrates how we can get caught up in our own emotions. Kay's friends meant well and so did my friend, but we need to use extreme caution in what we say to those in grief.

We've examined the worst things to say, now, let's look at the best things to say to those in grief. The most important things you can remember is to keep your condolences simple and to speak from the heart. It's brave and it's hard to do but so necessary to make this world a kinder place. Don't try to say the perfect thing. Express sympathy from your heart, and you'll never go wrong with an authentic message of love and support.

THE BEST THINGS TO SAY TO THOSE IN GRIEF

1. I am so sorry for your loss.

This phrase is simple yet powerful. If you don't know what to say, just say, "John, I'm so sorry for your loss." You don't have to elaborate, just express your sadness for their loss. I don't say, "My condolences for your loss." It sounds too formal and businesslike to me.

2. That must really hurt.

This phrase sounds strange and is different from how we normally approach helping someone in grief. We want to play it down and take their minds off the pain, but they desperately need to say what hurts and have their pain understood. This statement validates their pain and shows you are empathic toward their deep sorrow.

3. I wish I had the right words; just know I care.

This phrase shows your humility and compassion. You're admitting you don't know what to say, that you don't have the right words, but that you deeply care for the person in grief.

4. I don't know how you feel, but I am here for you to help in any way I can.

This phrase shows your vulnerability and honesty. "I don't know how you feel but I want to walk this grief journey with you and help you in any way I can."

5. You and your loved one will be in my thoughts and prayers.

Prayer is powerful. Letting someone know you care for them and are praying for them in their pain is one of the best things you can do for someone who is grieving the death of a loved one.

6. My favorite memory of your loved one is...

After my daughter died, I loved to hear stories about her that I didn't know about. It might have been her teacher, or a friend, or one of Jackie's friends who would share memories about my daughter with me.

Those stories are precious and show the thoughtfulness of the person sharing them. People are often hesitant to bring up my daughter's name or to share a story about her. I only wish they knew how much joy hearing about my daughter brings to my heart and soul.

7. I am always just a phone call away.

This is a positive phrase that shows you're wanting to practically help them in their time of need when they're ready for your help. It lets them know that you are available to them, day, or night. "Call me or text me anytime."

8. Give them a hug instead of saying something.

I call this the ministry of presence. No words. Just a warm embrace that shows you truly care means the world to people.

9. We all need help at times like this. God is with you, and I am here for you.

This lets your friend know that God loves them, is present with them, and that you will be with them, too. This shows that you are a loyal friend.

10. Say nothing; just be with the person.

People don't need our words as much as they need our presence. When Pastor Bill lost his father, his associate pastor, Don, drove 180 miles to the graveside service and stood at the grave site, wrapped his arms around Bill, and wept with him for five minutes before walking away. He didn't say a single word. Bill will remember that embrace until he goes to his own grave.

3 HELPFUL RESPONSES TO PEOPLE IN PAIN (3 H's)

It's vital that we give people permission to grieve their loss and to provide a safe place for them to talk about what hurts the most. Grieving people are searching for safety because there is nothing safe about loss. The most important gift we can give people is our presence. In my work as a pastor, we call this the ministry of presence. Presence is the act of being with another person, with your full attention and engagement.

Author and grief expert, Doug Manning, describes three helpful responses we can offer to those in grief. These impactful responses can be remembered as the 3 H's: 1) Hang around, 2) Hug, and 3) Hush. Those in grief need our presence; nothing takes the place of being there. They also need our hugs. Nothing feels better than a hug when we are hurting. And most of all, they need us to hush. That is the hardest one of all.

Hang Around

Hanging around grieving people includes standing by them through active listening, compassion, and empathy. When you genuinely listen, people will realize you care about them. Listening to their stories and saying the name of the deceased lends support to one who is grieving.

Hug

Hugs are one of the most powerful tools we have as human beings to bring comfort to our loved ones. A simple hug can convey more than words ever can. After a significant loss, grieving people who are visited, hugged, and touched often report feeling comforted and supported.

They experience a sense of connection that helps them continue to search for meaning and purpose in life. Since touch is physical, it has bodily effects. Hugging helps lower blood pressure, reduces the risk of heart disease, heart attack, and stroke. Hugs also release feel-good chemicals in the body and boost our self-esteem.

Touch is a powerful language to express feelings of safety, love, and connection to people. When we are touched in comforting ways, our brains are flooded with dopamine, serotonin, and oxytocin. These feel-good hormones help regulate our mood and make us feel calmer and happier. When we aren't touched, our brains suffer from the lack of these chemicals and we may feel depressed, anxious, stressed, and have trouble sleeping.

I'll never forget how comforting it was to receive hugs from my church family and friends immediately after Jackie's funeral service concluded. A few of the Saddleback staff flew up to Sacramento for the service and I still remember the warm feeling I got inside when Kay Warren, Tom, and Chandel Holladay hugged me. And of course, the hug master himself, Rick Warren, is a tremendous hugger. Pastor Rick understands the power and significance of personal touch and the impact of hugs.

Donna, a friend and singer from Sunrise Church, recently battled breast cancer and received intensive chemotherapy treatment. She thought, I need a hug from Pastor Dave. So, she asked God in prayer for such a hug. That night, she had a dream: "I was at a work conference and in walks this tall man wearing a blue suit. It was Pastor Dave and I fell into his arms, crying uncontrollably!" She felt this was the answer to her prayer. Donna didn't pray for a sermon from me but a hug. People remember your hugs more than your sermons.

Author Maya Angelou said, "People will forget what you said... but people will never forget how you made them feel."

A father from Saddleback Church died in a motorcycle accident during the pandemic, so I had to virtually plan his memorial service. He left behind his wife and two kids, a boy and a girl. His memorial service was held outside at the San Juan Capistrano campus and limited to ten people in attendance.

When the family arrived, the 18-year-old daughter made a beeline for me and came toward me with tears in her eyes and arms wide open, expecting a hug. How would I respond considering the health crisis? Our staff had been advised not to touch anybody. On top of that, I am immunocompromised. Even with the possibility of getting COVID-19 myself, I felt like she needed a hug. I hugged her and we wept together.

Hush

When you're trying to help someone in pain, please remember this: The deeper the pain, the fewer the words you use. The reality is you don't need to say anything. Just show up and shut up. You can't talk people out of their pain. Some pain is beyond words. When it's the right time, the hurting person will speak. Then, you'll be able to say something to them, as well.

Sitting Shiva was part of the mourning process in Judaism. The Hebrew word shiva means seven. Shiva lasted for seven days when a person died. After the initial mourning and burial, mourners would sit in their homes as visitors came to give comfort. We see this in the book of Job when his friends came and sat next to him on the ground for seven days after his loss and initially didn't say a word. It was when they opened their mouths that harm was done. We need to learn how to trust presence, touch, and silence.

TIPS FOR WHEN OTHERS SAY HURTFUL COMMENTS TO YOU

Let others know if they hurt your feelings

When something doesn't sit right with you, you can say, "Ouch!" Or "That's not helpful." I know as a person in grief, you shouldn't have to be the teacher. But sometimes we are. You don't have to respond in the moment.

Consider forgiveness

We all say the wrong things sometimes. Can you hold onto the friendship without forgiving the action? You can let them know how their words stung but also how much you value the relationship. (Ephesians 4:32).

Make a direct ask

Ask for what you need. So often others don't know what would be helpful to you. You might need to let others know exactly what they can do to support you.

Understand the Rule of 3

If you're a friend or family of someone in grief. Call them 3 days after the funeral, three weeks after the funeral, and 3 months after the funeral. Call without expectation. Reach out to people and don't be afraid to mention their loved one's name.

It's never too late to apologize

If you've said something that wasn't helpful, give them a call and let them know that you're sorry and that you want to understand how to support them.

THE END



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