

WHAT TO SAY

and not to say

Most of us haven't been taught what to say when someone we know is grieving, so it's easy to fall back on platitudes and clichés. Here are suggestions for what to say instead to a parent, caregiver, or colleague who is grieving. Of course, many of these questions can be adapted to use with children.

RATHER THAN...

I'm sorry for your loss.

There's nothing inherently wrong with this phrase, but it's hard to know how to respond and can feel like an afterthought phrase that starts to lose its meaning after hearing it so many times.

TRY...

Thank you for telling me about what happened. I know there are no words to make it better. Just know that I'm here and want to support you and your family however I can.

RATHER THAN...

I know what you're going through.

While you might want to let them know you get it, doing so puts the focus on you and can close the door on the grieving person's unique experience and connection with the person who died.

TRY...

Grief is so unique for each person. What is it like for you?

RATHER THAN...

How are you?

Under the best of circumstances this question can be difficult to answer. Add in loss and answering a casual, off-handed, "How are you?" might be overwhelming.

TRY...

Nice to see you. I'm glad you're here. How are things today/in this morning/in this moment?

RATHER THAN...

Are you/they over it?

This implies pressure to be "better" or to go back to how someone was before a loss.

TRY...

There is no timeline for grief. We are here to support you and your family over the long term.

RATHER THAN...

Did you get closure?

Closure means something different to each person and for many, it's not the goal of grief.

TRY...

How does your family and culture mark major life transitions like this?

RATHER THAN...

Don't feel that way.

Trying to wash away someone's difficult emotions can give the message they are wrong or bad for feeling how they feel.

TRY...

You're really struggling with feeling guilty. I'm here if you want to share more.

RATHER THAN...

Your mom/dad/grandmother would/wouldn't want you to...

This can put pressure on someone to deny their feelings and might spark guilt or shame. Even if you knew the person, avoid assuming what they would think or feel.

TRY...

What are you missing about them lately? Tell me about your anger/tears/worries.

RATHER THAN...

You must be/feel...

Assuming how someone is feeling can be affirming (if you assume correctly), but more often it sets an expectation for their reactions that may or may not be true.

TRY...

People can have lots of different feelings, including feeling numb. What has it been like for you?

RATHER THAN...

You're so strong.

This assumes you know how someone is doing and leaves little room for grief to be messy and look like the complete opposite of strong.

TRY...

I know grief looks different for everyone, and especially privately vs. publicly. I'm glad to see you here today.

RATHER THAN...

They're in a better place/everything happens for a reason/at least they're no longer in pain.

Any attempt to put meaning on someone else's experience assumes everyone shares the same world view. Instead, invite those who are grieving to talk about what they think and feel.

TRY...

I'm glad you told me. How can I best support you and your family?

RATHER THAN...

Let me know if there's anything I can do.

Offering to help in this way puts the responsibility on the grieving person to identify what they need and reach out to ask. It's more helpful to make specific, tangible offers.

TRY...

I noticed that Manuel is having a tough time saying goodbye to you at morning dropoff. Would you like some help strategizing ways to make it less challenging?

