

# Death and Grieving



*Words to say, and not say, to the grieving*

“Offering someone a safe place to express his/her grief, over and over again, could be the most healing thing we offer. The most important advice is to listen, not tell people what they should be feeling or how to deal with their grief.”

- Maureen Waldron, Associate Director of the Collaborative Ministry Office at Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska.

Washington – Helping others cope with their grief is difficult, even if you have experienced your own tragic loss, but knowing what to say or what not to say can help you comfort the griever without putting him or her in additional pain.

“Often, I think the clichés we use to try and comfort people puts a burden on them by requiring them to be strong, to not cry and to move on with life when they are in the middle of an incredibly difficult part of grief,” said Maureen Waldron, associate director of the Collaborative Ministry Office at Creighton University in Omaha, Nebraska.

Sometimes we encourage people to move on with grief because we’re uncomfortable being around the “depth of their pain,” she said in an email to Catholic News Service.

The collaborative ministry office at Creighton University has posted online resources to help people through stages of grief: <http://onlineministries.creighton.edu/CollaborativeMinistry/Grief/avoid-cliches.html>. According to the material, individuals should say “I’m sorry” instead of “I understand how you feel.” Or “I don’t know why it happened” instead of “It all happened for the best.”

Rather than trying to answer the bereaved’s unasked questions or provide philosophical reasoning, simply listening or expressing confusion and offering supportive help is appropriate.

“How are you doing with all this; I’m here and I want to listen; you must really be hurting; take all the time you need; I’ll call tomorrow and please tell me what you are feeling” are some of the appropriate phrases to say, according to the article.

Although it isn’t always easy to support a grieving person, people can be most helpful by entering into a griever’s pain and being willing to meet them where they are.

“They don’t want to hear that it will get better,” Waldron said, “because right now their grief might make it difficult for them to even function, it could be very helpful for someone simply to be with them in that incredible grief, not to say I know how you feel.”

She added that the grief process cannot be rushed and that everyone heals at different times.

“Offering someone a safe place to express his/her grief over and over again, could be the most healing thing we offer.” Waldron said. “The most important advice is to listen, not tell people what they should be feeling or how to deal with their grief.”

Donna McCarthy, who works as a consultant, specializing in oral and communication skills, said “There isn’t a real formula for knowing what to say, but basically talking from the heart is often the best.”

McCarthy is an associate of ECCO International, based in St. Paul, Minnesota. The Company – Effecting Creative Change in Organizations – helps individuals expand their influence and organizations expand their global possibilities.

Phrases like “My heart is broken for you,” “words fail me” and “I’m so sorry for your loss” are meaningful, healing words she said.

Words to avoid, she said, include expressions like “I know what you’re going through” and “it was God’s will that this happened.”

It is a common temptation to use your life example and compare it to the bereaved,” McCarthy said, but “now is not the time to do it as their grieving situation is unique to them.”

Above all, McCarthy said family and friends should listen, as it is such a powerful communicator. Even an embrace or touch on the shoulder is a nonverbal way to offer your sympathy and can be a huge gift to someone.

“It is essential for people to come to the funeral service because it shows honor for the deceased and the person who is grieving. It is the Christian thing to do, as it communicates your respect and support,” McCarthy said.

She also advised individuals to call their friend or family member directly before and after the death, as these are critical times for the bereaved.

Too often, she said, people consider their own comfort level and won’t approach the bereaved at these times, but in order to minister to them, place yourself in their shoes and forget about your own comfort level, she urged.

“It is important to communicate with them after the death especially on holidays or anniversaries to show your continued support,” McCarthy said. “Although it is the American way to say get on with things, some people simply can’t do that...even for years. Stay in touch with your friends and family who lost their loved ones and continue to encourage them way beyond the time of the death.”

(article by Jessica Pall – Catholic News Service - Catholic Exponent – October 14, 2011)