

A pair of hands, belonging to a person wearing a white shirt, are gently holding a heart-shaped wreath made of small white flowers with green centers. The background is a soft-focus green, suggesting an outdoor setting.

33 things to say ...

... WHEN YOU KNOW SOMEONE WHO IS GRIEVING



Doris Zagdanski



33 things to say ...

... WHEN YOU KNOW SOMEONE WHO IS GRIEVING



Doris Zagdanski

Copyright Doris Zagdanski 2010

National Library of Australia

ISBN 978 0 646 52799 4

Published in Australia by
Zagdanski Consulting Pty Ltd

ABN 22 083 094 535

PO Box 1510

Southport 4215

Queensland, Australia

www.allaboutgrief.com

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form by any means electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior permission of the publisher.

Introduction

Someone you know is grieving.

Perhaps you've sent a card or flowers.

Or you've attended the funeral.

You know that when you see them next or give them a call, you want to say the right thing.

Do I bring up the subject?

What if I put my foot in it?

Do I ask if they're coping?

What if I upset them?

What if I get all emotional too?

It's natural to be anxious. Most of us aren't well practised in talking about grief. We've grown up in a society that says: Big boys don't cry. Be brave. Be strong. Keep your feelings to yourself.

Once the funeral is over, grieving people soon experience the awkwardness of friends, including the avoidance of any mention of the person who's died. Conversations can become stilted and brief. Even an enquiring, "How are you?" is often not clear – do you mean how am I really coping or is it simply a greeting to which I'm supposed to answer in the usual way, saying "I'm fine thanks".

When you're grieving, you need to know that your friends will not abandon you or put pressure on you to act like your old self.

Grieving people need permission from those around them to:

- Speak openly about what happened
- Talk about the person who died
- Express how they are feeling
- Explain how they are coping
- Show their emotions
- Be themselves without being expected to put on a happy face because it will make everyone else feel better

Here are some helpful tips aimed to reduce the uncertainty about what to say.

1. Acknowledge what's happened – avoiding the person or the subject of death doesn't lessen the grief.

You could say something like this:

I heard about your son's accident. What a shock it must have been for you.

(Pause.... and let them speak)

I'm just calling to say hello and see how you're doing. I haven't seen you for a while.

(Pause... and let them speak)

I thought I'd give you a call seeing that it's Father's Day. I'm sure it will be so different for you without your Dad around.

(Pause... and let them speak)

2. Listen. Let them tell their story.

Let them tell you the truth about how they're coping. It's always nice to hear about happy memories and funny recollections but you have to be prepared to also hear about sadness, guilt, loneliness and thoughts of despair at living without someone special.

You don't have to say anything to:

- Cheer them up
- Fix their grief
- Take their mind off it

Remember, good listeners don't interrupt, change the subject, or talk about themselves and their own experiences. Just try to follow their story by keeping eye contact, nodding your head and saying the occasional "uh huh", "I see", or "mmm".

Grieving people often have a need to retell their story over and over – you can help by just listening. If you tell them to stop talking about it they will simply bottle up their story and feelings – their silence will not mean their grief has gone away.

3. *Allow them to cry and show their feelings.*

You don't need to do or say anything to stop their tears.

You can comfort them just by letting them cry or telling you how they are feeling. Stay with them, give them a hug or put your arm around them.

You don't have to:

- Bring them a glass of water
- Make them a cup of tea
- Leave the room
- Hand over a box of tissues
- Or do anything else because you are feeling uncomfortable

4. *Respond with Empathy. This is how you show your friend that you have been listening and have understood what they were trying to tell you.*

Empathy does not sound like this:

- Time will heal
- He had a good innings
- You're strong, you'll get over it
- It's probably happened for the best
- There are others worse off than you
- I know how you feel

When you show empathy in the right way from the start, your friend is likely to continue to open up about their feelings and trust you as someone they can rely on for understanding and support.

On the other hand, a lack of empathy can spoil communication with your grieving friend. They may feel that you are intolerant of their grief, or that you are dismissing the feelings and emotions they have been trying to share with you.

Words of empathy have two clear characteristics: they show you **accept** how the person is feeling and you **understand** that this is their way of coping with what's happened.

In other words, your response needs to reflect what you've heard – it should be connected to the information you have just been given, rather than be your advice about what to do or how to feel. You need to show you're on their wave length.

After you have listened, some natural ways you can respond with empathy could sound like this:

I can understand what you're saying – it's been really tough managing on your own.

You're feeling hurt because your friends are avoiding you and think that you should be over it by now.

It sounds like you're really struggling.

5. Allow enough time.

We think that most people start to get over their grief once the funeral is over – but not so. It can take days or weeks just for the shock to wear off and for the reality to set in that the person who died isn't coming home.

When someone special in your life dies, it can take some years before you learn to live without them. You need time to adjust to a new daily routine, learn new skills, as well as adapting to birthdays, anniversaries and family events without someone who had always been part of these special occasions.

Remember this. Whilst there may be a large turnout of mourners at a funeral which can be comforting and encouraging, most grieving people notice a sharp decline in phone calls, visits, and other contact soon afterwards.

As the true feelings and reactions of loss start to be felt in the weeks and months after the funeral, much needed support is often not there. This can be a very lonely, isolated time. By the time the first anniversary comes around, finding someone to talk to about your loss may have dwindled to a handful.

So, we need to be willing to stay around and be aware of significant days and reminders which need to be faced year in year out, well after the funeral.

On the following pages you'll find some helpful ways to respond while your friend is grieving. You'll learn what to say when they are:

- Angry
- Scared
- Lonely
- Tearful
- Guilty
- Depressed
- Struggling to cope at Christmas time
- Upset by reminders of the person
- Asking "Why did this happen?"
- Packing up clothes and possessions
- Feeling overwhelmed and going crazy

Anger

I'm so angry, it's just not fair. How could this happen to someone so fit and healthy?

It's not right.

Your children shouldn't go before you do.

It's not the way it's supposed to be.

I get so angry when people say...

'Why aren't you over it yet?'

They should try being in my shoes.

You say:

I can understand why you get angry – sometimes people say such hurtful things – they just don't get it!

It must be so hard to comprehend – you never would imagine that you'd have to bury one of your own children.

Your world's been turned upside down – no wonder you're angry about it.

Try not to say:

Don't be angry, that won't help. You have to be thankful that he went so quickly and didn't suffer.

At least you have an angel in heaven now.

Don't waste your energy being angry, be grateful for all the good times you had.

Fear

I'm scared of being on my own.

I don't think I'll be able to cope. After all those years together I just can't get used to this.

I don't know what to do.

He always did everything for me. I don't know where to begin to pick up all the pieces.

I don't know what the future holds for me now. It all looks so bleak to me.

How am I going to raise the kids on my own?

You say:

I can see this has really shaken your confidence. It must seem pretty scary for you.

It must be hard to look ahead and make new plans and dreams knowing that Jack won't be there with you.

I can understand why you're feeling like that – it can be really daunting starting out on your own.

Try not to say:

You're strong, you'll manage.

Life will go on. You have to stay positive.

Don't worry; you've got lots of people who'll help if you need them. If there's anything I can do just give me a call.

Loneliness

I always thought I'd go first.

What will I do without her?

Night time is the worst time...

I dread going to bed and **lying awake all on my own.**

It's just so lonely without him.

All my friends have their partners...

I feel like the odd one out.

And now I've started to notice that they don't invite me along any more - it's like I don't fit in.

You say:

I can understand why you're feeling so lonely – the two of you always did everything together.

Night time must be hard for you. I can imagine how the hours must drag and there's no one there for you.

It sounds like there are so many things to adjust to now that you're on your own.

Try not to say:

You've got a big family, I'm sure they'll keep you company.

Why not try joining a club so that you can meet some new friends. That'll also help to keep your mind off it.

You're young; I'm sure you'll find someone special and get married again.



I feel so sad, I just can't stop crying. I wonder if I'll ever be able to smile again.

Every time I look at our photos **I start to cry** all over again.

I don't think I'll **ever stop crying...** Everywhere I look I see something that reminds me.

You say:

I guess there are so many reminders all over the house, no wonder they set you off in tears.

It's ok with me if you feel like crying.

It's alright to cry – you've lost the most important person in your life.

Try not to say:

Be brave, don't cry. Crying won't change anything. You've got to be strong and think of the children.

Try to cheer up and think of the good times - you have so many wonderful years of memories together.

Maybe you should put the photos away if they upset you so much.

What are normal grief reactions?

People will have a variety of reactions to grief.

Here is a sample of common feelings, behaviours, thoughts and physical responses of a grieving person.

Normal grief can look something like this...

Feelings

-
- | | |
|--------------|---------------------|
| ▪ Anger | ▪ Relief |
| ▪ Guilt | ▪ Bitterness |
| ▪ Sadness | ▪ Numbness |
| ▪ Loneliness | ▪ Resentment |
| ▪ Isolation | ▪ Overwhelming loss |

Behaviours

-
- | | |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| ▪ Aggression | ▪ Need to keep busy, constantly active |
| ▪ Can't sleep | ▪ Withdrawal |
| ▪ Can't eat, change in eating habits | ▪ Panic attacks |
| ▪ Crying | ▪ Change in smoking or drinking habits |
| ▪ Can't concentrate | ▪ Talking constantly about what happened |
| ▪ No interest in usual activities | |

Thoughts

-
- | | |
|--|--------------------------------|
| ▪ I will never get over this | ▪ Why? |
| ▪ What will people say? | ▪ I can't go on |
| ▪ This is a nightmare | ▪ This will haunt me forever |
| ▪ Nothing in my life will ever be the same again | ▪ I can't believe it's true |
| ▪ How will I explain this to the children? | ▪ Why did God let this happen? |
| ▪ I'm so relieved it's over | |

Physical Responses

-
- | | |
|--|-------------------|
| ▪ Feeling sick in the stomach | ▪ Off balance |
| ▪ High blood pressure | ▪ Nausea |
| ▪ More susceptible to illness than usual | ▪ Anxiety |
| ▪ Nervous rash, skin conditions | ▪ Stressed |
| ▪ No energy | ▪ Headaches |
| | ▪ Aches and pains |

Where we sometimes go wrong, is that we think grief is mostly about tears and sadness when in fact it affects the way we feel, think, act and our health and wellness.

When we understand this broad view of what grief is like, we can appreciate more fully what grieving people are going through.

Guilt

It's all my fault. I should have seen it coming.
He said he was depressed but I didn't think it was that serious.

I feel dreadful. I wish I'd visited her more often in the nursing home.
I never got to say goodbye.

I wish we hadn't had that fight... I didn't mean what I said.
I never got to say I'm sorry and **now it's too late.**

You say:

It sounds like you're carrying a real burden and blaming yourself for what happened.

I can see it's really weighing heavily on you.

It sounds like you want to turn the clock back and do things differently – it seems you need to get something off your chest.

Try not to say:

Don't blame yourself. You shouldn't say things like that.

Don't worry. You can't change what's happened.

Don't talk like that, you're just upsetting yourself. You have to stop dwelling on the past.

Depression

I don't feel like doing anything much these days.

I just can't be bothered making the effort.

I feel so down.

I don't know if I'll ever be able to cope with this. I don't seem to enjoy doing anything anymore.

There's no use in going on.

I can't see the point in living without her.

You say:

I'm sure the world seems really gloomy to you right now. I guess it's hard to stay positive when you miss him so much.

It sounds like you've lost your energy for living – it must be hard some days to even get out of bed.

You're really struggling with this. I can understand how empty the world must seem without her.

Try not to say:

You've got to stop feeling sorry for yourself.

There are lots of people in the world who go through a personal tragedy – and many of them come out of it much stronger.

Look around you – you've got so many wonderful friends and family – it can't be that bad.

Christmas

I'm dreading this Christmas.

It just won't be the same.

I can't get in the mood for Christmas.

I don't feel like writing cards or putting up the tree.

I was walking through the shopping centre the other day, then I saw Santa with all the kids and Christmas carols were playing, and **it just got too much for me.**

You say:

I can see what you mean – everywhere you go there's Christmas cheer – and it just makes you feel all the more miserable.

Christmas will certainly be hard for you this year. There's going to be a big gap with Jim gone.

I guess it's not going to be such a happy Christmas at your house this year. I sense you're really going to struggle to put on a happy face.

Try not to say:

You'll have to cheer up for the sake of the kids.

It probably won't be as bad as you think.

Come and join our family.

Reminders

Even going to the supermarket upsets me. Whenever I go down the aisle with his favourite chocolate, **I start to get all teary again.**

It's her birthday next week. Another year without her. It just doesn't get any easier.

Whenever I hear that Billy Joel song on the radio **it reminds me of our wedding day.** I can't bear to listen to our favourite music anymore.

You say:

It sounds like there are reminders all around you and they trip you up when you're least expecting it.

Birthdays must be really hard to cope with. It's another special day that the two of you won't be able to share together like you used to.

It must be hard to get used to all those things that have changed in your life – even something as simple as shopping can be hard to cope with.

Try not to say:

Time will heal.

You'll get used to it.

Why don't you go on a holiday and get away from all these things that upset you.

Why?

Why? Why? Why?

This question just keeps going around and around in my head.

Why did God allow this to happen?

Why weren't our prayers answered?

Why me?

Why our family?

What did we ever do to deserve this?

You say:

It sounds like your head is full of questions – and there are no answers that anyone can give you.

It must be so hard not knowing why this happened – I can see it's eating away at you.

It seems so unfair, nothing makes any sense now.

Try not to say:

You have to have faith. All things happen for a reason.

God only takes the best.

There's no point in asking why, you just have to accept what's happened.

Packing up

I can't bear to throw out his things yet – it seems like I'm trying to get rid of him.

I don't know if I should keep these things or give them away. **I just don't know what to do.**

I just fell in a heap the day I sold his car...

It was the last thing to go.

I couldn't bear to see it drive away.

You say:

It must be hard to know what to do – maybe you're not ready to make such final decisions yet.

There must be so many precious memories in all those things – it's going to be really hard for you to go through each one.

That car was more than just a car wasn't it? I guess it was like saying goodbye all over again.

Try not to say:

You don't need all that stuff anyway.

The sooner you get rid of those things, the sooner you'll feel better.

Why don't we have a garage sale – I'll help you organise it.

Going crazy

I've never felt like this before.

I'm really worried that there's something wrong with me.

I can't think straight, I'm forgetful all the time and I can't concentrate on anything at work. I used to be so competent and now I just can't be bothered.

I keep going over and over what happened.

I just can't seem to think of anything else.

You say:

It sounds like you've got so much going on in your mind that you're overwhelmed by it all.

You've had such a big shock, no wonder your head's in a spin and you can't take it all in.

I can understand why you are worried – it's the first time you've been through something like this and you just don't know what to expect.

Try not to say:

Don't worry, all this will pass.

Everyone goes through this.

I think you're in stage one of grief. You'll get back to your old self before you know it.

To sum up

The idea of this book is to steer you in the right direction when you're talking to someone who's grieving.

If you can develop the confidence to bring up the subject that someone has died, and then stay with the conversation that follows, you will probably be helping more than you think.

A common experience of grieving people is that they find themselves dealing with the avoidance behaviours of their friends – they avoid talking about what's happened, avoid asking genuinely about how they're feeling, and avoid conversations that explore the whole subject of how to manage the changes that this loss has brought to their lives.

So a friend who is able to keep the conversation flowing by responding with empathy rather than a one-line cliché or a solution-giving piece of advice, can make a real difference.

Remember, you don't have to take their grief away or say something cheerful. Imagine your role as being someone who allows the grief to be aired, explored and explained so that it doesn't stay locked up inside because everyone is uncomfortable with it. If you can do this, you will be truly helpful.

Here is a description of what can happen for grieving people when they are allowed to talk about their story and they feel that someone has really heard and understood what they were trying to tell them...

When I truly hear a person and the meanings that are important to him at that moment, hearing not simply his words, but him, and when I let him know that I have heard his own private personal meanings, many things happen. This is first of all a grateful look. He feels released. He wants to tell me more about his world. He surges forth in a new sense of freedom. He becomes more open to the process of change.

I have often noticed that the more deeply I hear the meanings of that person, the more there is that happens. Almost always, when a person realizes he has been deeply heard, his eyes moisten. I think in some real sense he is weeping for joy. It is as though he were saying, "Thank God, somebody heard me. Somebody knows what it's like to be me."

In such moments I have had the fantasy of a prisoner in a dungeon, tapping out day after day a Morse code message, "Does anybody hear me? Is anybody there?" And finally one day he hears some faint tappings which spell out "Yes." By that one simple response he is released from his loneliness; he has become a human being again.

There are many, many people living in private dungeons today, people who give no evidence of it whatsoever on the outside, where you have to listen sharply to hear the faint messages from the dungeon.

Excerpt from 'A Way of Being' by Carl Rogers

Also by the author

Something I've Never Felt Before

How teenagers cope with grief

Stuck For Words

What to say to someone who is grieving

Now That The Funeral Is Over

Understanding the effects of grief

What's Dead Mean?

*How to help children cope with death. A book for talking,
drawing, pasting, sharing ...*

When Pets Die

It's alright to grieve

To order copies of this booklet or any
of the titles listed above visit:

www.allaboutgrief.com

About the author

This is the seventh book which Doris Zagdanski has written on grief. When asked what people most want know about the subject, she says a common concern is, "What do I say to someone who's grieving?"

In this book, Doris takes everyday comments from grieving people and shows you how to respond so that they really feel heard and you've understood what life is like for them now.

'You don't have to take their grief away or say something cheerful. Imagine your role as being someone who allows the grief to be aired, explored, explained so that it doesn't stay locked up inside because everyone is uncomfortable with it. If you can do this, you will be truly helpful.'



Doris Zagdanski is well known as a writer, trainer and educator on the topic of grief. She communicates in a down to earth style and speaks from the heart. Whilst her professional career is currently in the funeral industry, she is also a regular guest speaker and presenter to those who work with grieving people.

ISBN 978-0-646-52799-4



9 780646 527994