

Fifteen Things Not to Say to a Bereaved Man

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This is one of those articles that you may want to copy and give to someone you know. When your loved one died, the people around you probably tried in a number of ways to help you. Words can help or they can hurt. We assume that most people want to help us when we're down; but don't you sometimes find that they say the strangest things? Let's look at not-so-helpful statements that well-meaning friends and relatives have been known to say to a man (and often, to a women) in grief. Are you ready for the famous list of statements that has made the blood of many bereaved men boil? May we have the envelope please? And the "winners" are:

1. *"I know just how you feel¹, my cat/third cousin/neighbor/friend's uncle/parakeet died."*

This is at the top of most people's "worst statement" list. Think about it: even if the father of identical twin brothers died, one twin could not assume he knew "just" how his brother felt. We each have our own personalities and our unique relationship with the person who died. As tempting as it may be to try to identify with a man in grief, stop yourself from uttering these words.

2. *"How is your wife/mother/other children/sister coping with the death?"*

There's nothing wrong with the statement, except the questioner never gets around to "How are *you* coping?" It is based on the assumption that the man is holding it together. Or it may be the case that the person asking the question is fearful of finding out how the man really feels. So it is easier to ask about other (more often female) family members. It's a good question if it is asked in the spirit of concern about all who have been affected by the death—including the man.

3. *"You must be strong/be a man/hang in there/keep your chin up."*

Men get this all the time in subtle and sometimes very overt ways. It often means, "Don't show me how much you're hurting because I couldn't take watching you in pain." Such statements make it difficult for a man to show how he really feels.

4. *"It's time to move on."*

Here comes the judgment. When a death occurs, it's been my experience that the public can put up with the pain of grief for only so long—typically a few months for a chronic illness and several months for a sudden death. However, once the one-year point has passed, the majority of people (except for those who've been through a similar death) begin to tire observing a bereaved person "dwell" in their grief. Men may be especially pressured to put their grief behind them.

5. *"That's the way life goes/it was his time/it's better this way."*

What a way to minimize someone's pain. Better for whom? Sure, your loved one may have been in a great deal of pain and you and your family may be relieved that it's over. But, it is up to you if it's "better" this way—not anyone else.

¹ This is the title of a 1986, book by Erin Linn in which she lists and explains the clichés of grief and offers suggestions for more supportive statements.

6. *“You’ve got to accept/snap out of/resolve it.”*

Similar to #4, but the difference is in the focus on the death as a problem that must be fixed, solved, reconciled. Men are sometimes sucked into the belief that everything can be fixed and even try to hang on to this belief for a time after a death occurs. The word “accept” was first made popular in the bereavement genre 30 years ago by Dr. Elisabeth Kubler-Ross in her book that explained people’s final reaction to their terminal illness as “acceptance”—something even she took back years later. However, the term has stuck in the mind of the public. To see a man in a great deal of pain over the death of a loved one tempts those around him to encourage him to reach that final stage, get over it, and accept. We will discuss this in a future issue of *Grief*.

7. *“At least”*

When interacting with a person who’s experienced a loss, never begin a sentence with these words. As soon as you do, you have positioned yourself as someone who is trying to find or make something positive out of a tragedy. As difficult as it may be for you to watch a man you know experience excruciating, unremitting pain, you need to bite your lip and not fall into the trap called “Despite all this tragedy in your life, aren’t you at least happy that...?” It never helps. On the other hand if the man comes up with his own “at least,” then it’s a different story. Make sense?

8. *“Now she’s at peace/out of pain/in God’s hands/in a better place/better off/an angel in heaven.”*

The clergy have gotten in a lot of trouble over this one. As in #7, let the bereaved man decide on his own that his loved one is now better off. It’s not your call.

9. *“You can have more children/marry again.”*

Yes, well-meaning, intelligent people who look just like you and me have said this. Resign from this club.

10. *“If there’s anything I can do....” (and then they do nothing)*

The best way to offer help is to be specific: “Would you like me to fix you dinner tonight, drive you (or your family member) anywhere this month, mow your lawn, watch the kids, visit your mother’s grave with you, go to the movies with you this Friday, call you on Saturday mornings, pick up fresh vegetables for you this week, walk your dog on Thursdays?”

11. *“Isn’t it about time you packed up the clothes?”*

This is another timetable judgment problem. There exists no rule, law, protocol, or dictum for a proper length of time to keep belongings of a deceased loved one. You can keep your loved one’s belongings as long as you wish. You can. You really can.

12. *“Don’t cry/it’ll be OK.”*

For many people it is tough to watch the man in their life cry. To observe a big guy with tears streaming down his face, to hear his sobs, to watch his face contort in pain is a difficult experience for many people. The job of people around you, however, is to let you “cry ‘til you’re dry.” In a future article we’ll discuss crying.

13. *“You mean you haven’t cried about it?”*

This is the opposite of #12. It implies that there is something wrong with a man not crying. Do not measure a person’s depth of grief by the number of tears he sheds. Research is clear that men tend to cry less frequently than women and that there are more men than women who have not cried in years.

14. *“There’s a lesson in all this....”*

Maybe there is—maybe there isn’t. But, as before, leave it up to him to arrive, if ever, at this conclusion.

15. *“You mustn’t feel that way.”*

To tell anyone how to feel is a mistake. Even if he says he doesn’t feel anything, let him be OK with that. If he reports that he feels guilty, let him. If he says he’s angry, support him. If he’s fearful, empathize with him. If he feels depressed, sit with him. But above all else, let him feel or not feel. That is the best support of all.

How can we help a grieving man? First, of course, by wiping the 15 statements from our vocabulary. Second, to offer social support. Psychologists tell us that there are three kinds of social support: emotional, material, and informational. Let’s look briefly at each.

Emotional Social Support. This is the support in which help is given simply by being a good listener and not judging. The people who do this well are few and far between. Despite our best efforts, judgments can sometimes creep into our support attempts. A friend of mine called me a few years ago to get some help for his brother whose wife had taken her life. The phone call was only about 15 minutes; but I think my friend was surprised when the main focus of our conversation was on two areas: (a) dropping his statements of judgment, such as, “It’s been seven months—it’s time to move on.” and “You still have her clothes in the closet?” and (b) being a good listener. A few weeks later I received a note from him, which read, “Bob, thank you for helping me with my brother. My approach to him is now a little softer.” My friend’s brother is lucky because he realized that the support he was trying to give wasn’t working and he reached out for help. Now that we’ve got a beginning understanding of social support, let’s look at another type.

Material Social Support. In this case the person is helping you by doing things: driving to an appointment, baking you a casserole, taking the kids to soccer practice. Sometimes men are reluctant to ask for and accept. Is this an issue for you? What would it take for you to call someone and ask for a little help? If someone you knew asked you for the same type of help, would you help them? Who can you call to help?

Informational Social Support. In some cases, the best way to help another person is to provide them with information. When a death occurs, a person can be helped by giving them a book, a newspaper clipping, a magazine article, a poem, or simply a note that says, “I care.” The majority of bereaved people in their first year or so after the death of their loved one prefer short articles, books, or booklets rather than 200+ page books.

These three modes of social support remind us that different people can provide support to a grieving man in ways that match their style of giving and their relationship with that man. As you think about what you’ve been reading during the last few minutes, I want to leave you with one last question: Who in your life will be the lucky recipient of this article?

Until next time, remember: “I know just how you feel,” “keep your chin up,” and “hang in there.”