

What to Say & What Not to Say To People Who Are Grieving

Before You Say Or Do Anything

Ask yourself the following questions:

Am I saying this to ease my own discomfort with the other person's grief?

Am I doing this to ease my own discomfort with the other person's grief?

What To Say

"My condolences."

"I remember a wonderful experience I had with _____ . Let me tell you about it."

"Cry if you need to."

"What are you having trouble doing?"

"Which bills need to be paid?"

"What needs maintenance?"

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What Not To Say

“Be strong.”

“Stop crying.”

“Death is for the best.”

“Get over it. Everybody dies.”

“God wanted _____.”

“God took _____ away from you because of the way you live your life.”

“Death means nothing.”

“It’s good _____ died because you never know what could have happened later on.”

“_____ and _____ got divorced after their child died.”

“You’re in the wrong stage of grief. You should be in the _____ stage of grief.”

“Come back when you’re finished with the anger stage of grief.”

“Your loss is not as bad as _____’s loss.”

“Your loss is not as important as _____’s loss.”

“You need to get out.”

“It’s time to get married again.”

“You need to find closure.”

“You shouldn’t be feeling this way anymore.”

“When did _____ die?”

“How did _____ die?”

“I wish we could have the old you back!”

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General Advice

Never make decisions for a griever without their express permission to do so. If the griever asks you to make decisions for them, request guidelines for making those decisions.

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Never put words into a griever's mouth. When a man Paula Kramer barely knew asked how her husband died she said, "He was shot." When the man later found out that Paula's husband had committed suicide, he accused Paula of lying, insisting Paula had originally told him that someone had shot her husband. Saying her husband had been shot was easier than saying he had shot himself to a man Paula did not know well enough to trust with details about the worst day of her life.

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Never judge a griever for crying or feeling sad in one situation, then laughing or enjoying themselves a short time later in a different situation. Grievers cry or feel sad when they are reminded of their loss. Grievers have the right to both cry and laugh in the same day. When one of Paula's sisters got married, she suddenly started silently sobbing during the service. All of Paula's relatives saw her sobbing. Paula's father died the next day. At the funeral days later Paula laughed and talked and laughed, not wanting to be a spectacle of grief again.

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Never fix up a date for a widow or widower unless they have asked you to get them a date. Paula had been a widow for less than two weeks when one of her friends told her a man he knew was interested in asking her out. Paula's friend told the man he should ask Paula out because, "What the heck! She's single!" That friend is no longer in Paula's life. The man who was interested in Paula had the decency to ignore the friend's advice.

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Never send a gift or card to the griever in the name of the dead person.

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Never keep talking about how the dead person might have died after a griever tells you they don't talk about the death.

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Never tell sick or sarcastic jokes about the dead person.

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## **What to Say & What Not to Say To People Who Are Grieving**

Never decide that someone who has not experienced a certain kind of grief is the best person to help a person newly going through that kind of grief.

Paula Kramer knew a new widow, a divorced woman, and a married woman. The three women had known each other for decades. Paula met the widow four years before her husband's death from a long illness. She knew the other women through the new widow.

As a long time widow herself, Paula did her best to prepare the new widow for the aftermath of her husband's death. Paula one day mentioned to the divorced woman that she planned to call and check up on how the new widow was coping. The divorced woman informed Paula that the married woman was the best person to help the new widow. When Paula twice said, "But she's not a widow!", the divorced woman repeated that the married woman was the best person to help the new widow because they talked everyday. Before her husband's death, the new widow had complained to Paula more than once that her married friend had never tried to understand her husband's illness nor what his failing health meant in their lives. The married woman had no idea how to help the new widow.

### **Grief Comes And Goes In Waves**

Grief does not just end. It comes and goes in waves of various depths. Sometimes you will see or feel someone else's grief wave, sometimes you won't. Never judge a wave as inappropriate.

Twenty years after my husband died, my small church group met at the home of members who lived in a small town where my husband had relatives. My husband and I had been in that small town frequently while he was alive. It was my first time back there since his death. I sat so quietly that one of the still married women asked me if something was wrong. I explained. She asked how long my husband was dead. When I told her it had been 20 years, her reaction told me that she had decided I was inappropriately holding onto my grief. Yet another married woman thinking she knew more about grief than a widow knew.

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### **Grief Is An Individual Experience**

People respond to everything in life in different ways. People will respond to grief in different ways, too. Accept the way people respond to their grief.

Also accept that some people won't grieve in the expected way, or at all. In the widows group I mentioned above, one of the widows felt more grief for the marriage she didn't have than for her husband. Her husband beat her, insulted her, and manipulated her. His death ended all possibility that their marriage would become what she had expected on her wedding day.

### **What Grievors Can Do For Themselves**

A year after Paula's husband died, someone told her about a group of young widows in the area. No professional grief counselors were involved. The ages ranged from 21 to 54. They held meetings at each other's houses. Sometimes the host would bring in a speaker. Mostly, they just sat and talked to each other. It was the most healing experience Paula ever had. The widows did not have to explain anything to each other because everyone already knew. They did not have to justify anything to a misguided grief counselor who thought they were in the "wrong" stage of grief. They could talk about everything and anything with a shared understanding.

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### Explanation To Help You Understand The Following Example

Paula Kramer writes in detail about her family relationships to help other people avoid making the mistake she made. Paula's mistake was believing she could someday do just the right thing that would please her mother and siblings, convincing them to make Paula feel loved and included.

It was never going to happen.

Paula's mother was callous, cold, and distant all of Paula's life. In the last two years of her father's life, Paula witnessed her mother's repeated callousness towards her father. Yet Paula wasted another 12 years trying to please her mother before she finally understood that her mother had never loved her and never would love her, no matter what Paula did.

After Paula finally admitted to herself that her mother had never loved her, she was finally able to pay attention to the clues of her life. Putting the physical, mental, and emotional clues together, Paula finally recognized her murder memories – her memories of her mother's two attempts to murder her when she was very small. When those attempts to murder Paula physically failed, Paula's mother did her best to murder Paula mentally and emotionally.

Paula's mother taught all of Paula's relatives to ignore what Paula said and to discount what Paula did. As adults, Paula's siblings treated Paula and her daughter like trespassers in their lives.

Paula's mother and siblings stereotyped Paula negatively. Their negative stereotypes about Paula gave them the ability to create positive stereotypes about themselves. In order for Paula's mother and siblings to see Paula as she really is, they would also have to see themselves as they really are. They prefer their stereotypes. Paula wasted decades of her life trying to please her mother and siblings when pleasing them was never possible.

Paula wants to help other people avoid wasting their lives trying to please family members who will never let go of the negative stereotypes. She uses examples from her family relationships to get people thinking about their own family relationships. She wants people to recognize when their families have stereotyped them negatively so they can consciously choose to stay or walk away.

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### Example For Never Judging A Griever's Words

One day when Paula was a teenager and alone in the house, she decided to look through her parents' files. She found their will and read it. Paula's father split his money, giving two thirds to his wife and one third to divide between his children. Paula's father gave his children money any time he could justify it – birthdays, Christmas, A's on report cards, etc.. After Paula's father died, Paula asked when she would receive her inheritance. Even before Paula recognized her murder memories, she knew she had to protect herself from her mother. Paula saw the inheritance her father intended for her as a resource for protecting herself from her mother. Her mother coldly informed Paula she would inherit nothing.

For years, Paula had witnessed her mother bullying her father into doing what she wanted him to do. Paula's mother gave Paula's father a big retirement party when he retired at age 65. The retirement didn't last long. Paula's mother felt entitled to an annual trip to Europe. She told Paula's father he had to keep paying all of the household bills so her earnings could pay for the trips to Europe. After her father's death, it was obvious to Paula that her mother had bullied her father into changing his will.

That kind of family dynamic is invisible to observers. People like Paula's mother are good at creating an image that is the opposite of the truth. When Paula wrote her mother in early 1995 to say she was ending all contact, Paula told her mother to take her out of the will. No amount of money was worth staying in contact with the woman who had tried to murder her twice.

Remember Paula's story the next time you hear a seemingly callous remark from a griever. You cannot know everything that happens in any family. Stay respectful to everyone and speak respectfully about everyone. Refuse to listen to complaints by saying something positive about the target of the complaints. Refuse to give your opinion about family disagreements. A family conflict belongs to the family, not to you.