

What Not To Say When Someone is Grieving

Last week my dear friend Sandi Glahn wrote another boffo [blog post](#) about the myths of infertility, which included some of the dumb things people say.

It may be insensitivity or a lack of education that spurs people to say things that are unhelpful at the least and downright hurtful much of the time. I still remember my own daggers to the heart after our first baby died nine days after her birth. And for the past several years, I have been collecting actual quotes said to those already in pain.

So here's my current list of What Not To Say when someone is hurting:

Don't start any sentence with "At least. . . ."

- "At least you didn't have time to really love her."
- "At least he's in heaven now."
- "At least you have two other children."
- "At least that's one less mouth you'll have to feed."
- "At least it didn't have to go through the pain of birth."
- "At least you've had a good life so far, before the cancer diagnosis."

Don't attempt to minimize the other person's pain.

- "Cancer isn't really a problem." (e.g., Shame on you for thinking that losing your hair/body part/health is a problem.)
- "It's okay, you can have other children."

Don't try to explain what God is doing behind the scenes.

- "I guess God knew you weren't ready to be parents yet."
- "Now you'll find out who your friends are."
- "This baby must have just not been meant to be."
- "There must have been something wrong with the baby."
- "Just look ahead because God is pruning you for great

works.”

- “Cancer is really a blessing.”
- “Cancer is a gift from God because you are so strong.”

Don't blame the other person:

- “If you had more faith, your daughter would be healed.”
- “Remember that time you had a negative thought? That let the cancer in.”
- “You are not praying hard enough.”
- “Maybe God is punishing you. Have you done something sinful?”
- “Oh, you're not going to let this get you down, are you?”
(Meaning: just go on without dealing with it.)

Don't compare what the other person is going through to ANYTHING else or anyone else's problem:

- “It's not as bad as that time I. . .”
- “My sister-in-law had a double mastectomy and you only lost one breast.”

Don't use the word “should”:

- “You should be happy/grateful that God is refining you.”

Don't use clichés and platitudes:

- “Look on the bright side.”
- “He's in a better place.”
- “She's an angel now.” (NO! People and angels are two different created kinds! People do not get turned into angels when they die.)
- “He's with the Lord.”

Don't instruct the person:

- “This is sent for your own good, and you need to embrace it to get all the benefit out of it.”
- “Remember that God is in control.”
- “Remember, all things work together for good for those that love God and are called according to His purpose.” (Romans 8:28 is powerful to comfort oneself, but it can feel like

being bludgeoned when it comes from anyone else.)

What TO say:

- “I love you.”
- “I am so sorry.” You don’t have to explain. Anything.

What TO do:

- A wordless hug.
- A card that says simply, “I grieve with you.”
- Instead of bringing cakes, drop off or (better) send gift certificates for restaurants or pizza places.

And pray. Then pray some more. It’s the most powerful thing we can say or do.

This blog post originally appeared at blogs.bible.org/what-not-to-say-when-someone-is-grieving/ on January 20, 2009, and you can read the many comments there.

Starting Over: Facing the Future after Significant Loss

February 13th fell on a Tuesday that year, but it seemed like my unlucky day.

My wife of twenty years was divorcing me; it would be final in two days. February 1, my employer had shown me the door—on the twenty-fifth anniversary of my employment. Now, on February 13, I was in my physician’s office getting test results. Unaware of my difficulties, he asked, “Have you been under stress recently?” Perhaps he was assessing my emotional state to help him gently ease into the difficult subject he was about to address.

He said I might have cancer.

That evening, a longtime friend called to encourage me. As we spoke, I felt the weight of my world crashing in. Would the haunting pain of spousal rejection ever end? Where would I work? What of my life's mission? Would life itself last much longer? I wept into the phone as I struggled to make sense of the swirling vortex of uncertainty.

Relationships, work and health absorb our time, energy, memories and hopes. Ever had a fulfilling relationship turn to ashes? Maybe you've excelled at work; then a new or insensitive boss decides your services are no longer wanted or affordable. Or perhaps your health falters. Your parent or best friend dies suddenly of a heart attack or perishes in an auto wreck.

What do you feel? Shock? Grief? Anger? Desires for revenge or justice? Discouragement and depression? How do you cope with the loss, and how can you start over again?

Over dinner, a new friend told me he had lost both his parents in recent years. "How did you cope?" I inquired. He related painful details of their alcohol-related deaths. I listened intently and tried to express sympathy. "But how did you deal with their deaths?" I asked, curious to know how he had handled his feelings. "I guess I haven't," he replied. Painful emotions from deep loss can be difficult to process. Some seek solace by suppressing them.

My wife lost her father, then her mother, during a five-year span in her late twenties and early thirties. Focusing on her mother's needs after her father's passing occupied much of her thought. After her mother's death, she felt quite somber. "People who always were there, whom you could always call on for advice, were no longer around," she recalls. "That was very sobering." Over time, the pain of grief diminished.

How can you adjust to significant loss and start over again? I

certainly don't have all the answers. But may I suggest ideas that have worked for me and for others along life's sometimes challenging journey?

Grieve the loss. Don't ignore your pain. Take time to reflect on your loss, to cry, to ask questions of yourself, others or God. I remember deep, heaving sobs after my wife left me. I would not wish that pain on anyone, but I recommend experiencing grief rather than ignoring and stuffing it. This tends to diminish ulcers and delayed rage.

A little help from your friends. During divorce proceedings and my rocky employment ending, good friends hung close. We ate meals together, watched football games, attended a concert and more. A trusted counselor helped me cope. A divorce recovery group at a nearby church showed me I was not the only one experiencing weird feelings. Don't try to handle enormous loss alone.

Watch your vulnerabilities. In our coed divorce recovery group, I appreciated learning how women as well as men processed their pain. It also was tempting to enter new relationships at a very risky time. Some members, not yet divorced, were dating. Some dated each other. Attractive, needy divorcés/divorcées can appear inviting. After each group session, I made a beeline to my car. "Guard your heart," advises an ancient proverb, "for it affects everything you do."[{1}](#)

Look for a bright spot. Not every cloud has a silver lining, but maybe yours does. After my divorce and termination, I returned to graduate school and saw my career enhanced. My cancer scare turned out to be kidney stones, no fun but not as serious. I met and—four years after the divorce—married a wonderful woman, Meg Korpi. We are very happy.

CNN star Larry King once was fired from the *Miami Herald*. "It was very difficult for me when they dropped me," he recalls.

King says one can view firing as “a terrible tragedy” or a chance to seek new opportunities.[{2}](#)

Cherish your memories. Displaying treasured photos of a deceased loved one can help you adjust gradually to their loss. Recall fun times you had together, fulfilling experiences with coworkers or noteworthy projects accomplished. Be grateful. But don’t become enmeshed in past memories, because the time will come to. . .

Turn the page. After appropriate grieving, there comes a time to move on. One widow lived alone for years in their large, empty house with the curtains drawn. Her children finally convinced her to move but in many ways she seemed emotionally stuck for the next three decades until her death.

Significant steps for me were taking down and storing photos of my ex-wife. Embracing my subsequent job with enthusiasm made it fulfilling and productive. Consider how you’ll emotionally process and respond to the common question, “Where do you work?” Perhaps you’ll want to take a course, exercise and diet for health, or develop a hobby. Meet new people at volunteer projects, civic clubs, church, or vacations. Consider what you can learn from your loss. Often, suffering develops character, patience, confidence and opportunities to help others.

Sink your spiritual roots deep. I’m glad my coping resources included personal faith. Once quite skeptical, I discovered spiritual life during college. Students whose love and joy I admired explained that God loved me enough to send His Son, Jesus, to die to pay the penalty due for all my wrongdoing. Then He rose from the dead to give new life. I invited Him to enter my life, forgive me, and become my friend. I found inner peace, assurance of forgiveness, and strength to adapt to difficulties. Amidst life’s curve balls, I’ve had a close Friend who promised never to leave.

One early believer said those who place their faith in Christ “become new persons. They are not the same anymore, for the old life is gone. A new life has begun!”^{3} Jesus can help you start all over with life itself. He can help you forgive those who have wronged you.

As you grieve your loss, seek support in good friends, watch your vulnerabilities, and seek to turn the page. . . may I encourage you to meet the One who can help you make all things new? He’ll never let you down.

This article first appeared in [Answer](#) magazine 14:1 January/February 2007. Copyright © 2007 by Rusty Wright. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Notes

1. Proverbs 4:23 NLT.
2. Harvey Mackay, *We Got Fired!...And It's the Best Thing That Ever Happened to Us* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2004), pp. 150-153 ff.
3. 2 Corinthians 5:17 NLT.

Copyright © 2007 Rusty Wright