



**WHAT TO SAY
WHEN YOU
DON'T KNOW
WHAT TO SAY**

A GUIDE TO GRIEF

Turia.

YOU KNOW WHAT WE ALL HAVE IN COMMON?

Grief.

It sounds harsh, but it's true.

Loss, hardship, challenges - we all have to deal with these things. All of us, each and every one of us, are gonna face times that are stressful and hard.

But that doesn't make us all great at helping others through grief. Many of us have a hard time finding the words to say, or ways to help, when someone we know is having a hard time.

What do you say when your friend or loved one is hurting? It can be awkward, uncomfortable and painful to try and talk to your friend or loved one about the grief they're experiencing. Especially if you don't know what they're going through.

You might not know how you could even help. Or you might be so scared of saying the wrong thing that you end up not saying anything at all.

I GET ASKED ABOUT THIS A LOT.

My inbox will often fill up with questions like: *“My friend is in hospital after a really bad accident. What do I say and how can I help?”*.

The stories are always different but the question is the same: *What do you say when someone is going through grief, loss or trauma?*

I wanted to share some strategies with you, particularly in the lead up to the holidays - because this time of year, while happy for many, can be incredibly hard for others.

Here's what to say (and what to do) when you don't know what to say.



THE DO'S

Do say something.

Sometimes people are so afraid of saying the “wrong thing” that they don’t say anything. At all.

Don’t do this.

If you don’t know what to say, here are some words to try:

*“I’m so sorry. I don’t know what to say, but what you’re going through is hard/tough/sh*t and I’m here for you.”*

“I’m here for you if you ever want to talk. Like now. Or later. Or in the middle of the night.”

“I know you don’t know yet what will happen - and neither do I. But you won’t go through this alone. I will be there with you every step of the way.”

Do be pro-active.

Don't ask "*How can I help?*".

The person has just gone through something horrible. They might not want to ask for help, or know how you could help.

By asking this question you're putting it back onto them to deal with. So, instead, offer *specific* ways you can help.

When you're at the shops or buying groceries, pick up extra toilet paper or food and drop it over.

Call them and say "*I've made an extra large pot of chicken soup, I can drop it over tomorrow afternoon. Is that OK?*".

Do tell stories.

If someone has died, tell stories about them - share how they had an impact.

Remember, the grieving person is thinking about who they've lost all the time. You're not going to upset someone more by bringing them up, asking how they are or by sharing a story.

Put yourself in their shoes. If Michael died, I wouldn't want people to pretend that nothing happened. I'd be reminded that Michael was gone every single day. I'd want to hear stories about the impact he had on others too.



Do be aware of your position in the Kvetching Circle.

More on this on Page 11.

Do encourage support.

Encourage the person to find support in:

- People who have been through the same situation.

For e.g. if someone has found out they have breast cancer, you could encourage them to look into support services or you could offer to go with them. Make a list of local support groups or websites they could look into.

For me, after I was burnt, I became very close to the other survivors in the fire. As much as Michael and Mum were here for me, the only people who truly knew what I was experiencing were the very people who'd experienced it too.

- Books and movies. These had a huge impact on my recovery. I've got a list of [my favourite books here](#).

- Therapy or professional support.

Do be there for them.

Listen to them, be present, check in. Follow up. One text or one call is not enough.

Also, what does *"I'm here for you"* look like to you? Don't let time/distance/money be an excuse for you - *"being there"* can mean lots of different things.

If you can't physically be there, find another way to show up. You can call and leave a voicemail or a text msg – but don't do this just once, do it regularly.

"Hey mate, was thinking of you, love you infinitely. Give me a call back if you're up to it, otherwise I'll try again next week".

Remember: you can support the person in the way that you feel the most comfortable.

Just work to your strengths, and be consistent.

On the next page, I've listed a few examples of what "being there" looked like for different people during my recovery.



What "being there" can look like:

- My Nan sent me a letter and a box of chocolates every day for a whole year. I got 52 letters that year!
- My Mum cooked for me every day.
- My brother, who's into fitness, would come in to hospital and do a training session with me.
- My Dad would have scientific conversations with me.

If you're a movie buff or a big reader, send through a movie or book recommendation. Make them a playlist on Spotify and send it to them. Cook them your signature dishes.

Whatever "*being there*" looks like to you, do it and do it consistently.





THE DON'TS

Don't say "It's going to be OK".

You don't know that, so don't say it.

It's easy to feel like you want to make it better for the person experiencing pain or grief. But don't sweep their pain under the rug. Be real with them and don't offer blanket positive statements like this.

Don't offer up platitudes.

Don't say things like:

"Everything happens for a reason."

"God only gives you what you can handle."

"They're in a better place."

Be particularly careful with statements about faith and spirituality. Your faith might be an important part of your life and how you experience hard times, but don't assume to know the beliefs of others, especially when they are experiencing major loss or grief.

Don't say "at least".

Don't say things like *"At least this didn't happen"* or offer worst case scenarios. You're forcing gratitude on them during a time that is really tough to handle.

Also, don't share stories about other people who went through a similar experience with a worse outcome. If your friend's partner has just died, she doesn't need to know about your other friend whose partner and sister died the same week.

Don't expect acknowledgement straight away.

When I was in recovery, someone sent me flowers and then rang me up to check that I'd received them, and then reminded me to water them because they cost \$60! Not cool.

People appreciate your efforts to be there for them, even if they don't have the capacity to say "Thank you". Normal rules of society don't apply. It's not rude that they haven't been in touch. Just keep being there for them.



THE KVETCHING CIRCLE

Let me fill you in on this theory created by psychologist Susan Silk and her friend Barry Goldman. They call it “Ring Theory” or the “Kvetching Order”.

I call it the Kvetching Circle.

In a nutshell, the Kvetching Circle is a tool you can use to know how to act in a crisis.

Here's how it works:

Draw a circle. In this circle, write the name of the person at the centre of the crisis.

Now draw a larger circle around the first one. In this ring, put the name of the person next closest to the crisis.

In each larger ring, put the next closest people. Partners first. Parents and children before more distant relatives. Intimate friends in smaller rings, less intimate friends in larger ones.

When you are done, you have a Kvetching Circle. This is how Silk and Goldman explain how to use it:

The person in the centre ring can say anything she wants to anyone, anywhere. She can kvetch and complain and whine and moan and curse the heavens and say, ‘Life is unfair’ and ‘Why me?’ That's the one payoff for being in the centre ring.



Everyone else can say those things too, but only to people in larger rings.

When you are talking to a person in a ring smaller than yours, someone closer to the centre of the crisis, the goal is to help. Listening is often more helpful than talking. But if you're going to open your mouth, ask yourself if what you are about to say is likely to provide comfort and support. If it isn't, don't say it. Don't, for example, give advice. People who are suffering from trauma don't need advice. They need comfort and support. So say, "I'm sorry" or "This must really be hard for you" or "Can I bring you a pot roast?" Don't say, "You should hear what happened to me" or "Here's what I would do if I were you." And don't say, "This is really bringing me down."

If you want to scream or cry or complain, if you want to tell someone how shocked you are or how icky you feel, or whine about how it reminds you of all the terrible things that have happened to you lately, that's fine. It's a perfectly normal response. Just do it to someone in a bigger ring.

"Comfort in, dump out."

That's the Kvetching Circle. It can be a really helpful tool. I hope it helps!

I hope this guide has been useful.

Remember, it's OK to not know what to say or do when someone you know is going through grief, loss or trauma.

When that happens, use these tips to help you.

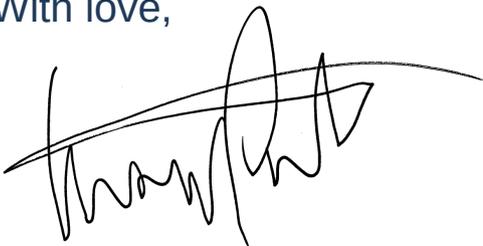
And if all else fails, just try to be present for your friend or loved one. Be there for them. That's all you really need to do - show up in whatever way you can.

Lastly, if you need support through this time, make sure you get the help you need as well.

Ask for support from someone in a larger Kvetching circle to you, or reach out to someone you trust, a professional or a doctor.

I've listed some support resources [here](#). Use these services if you need to - they can offer advice and provide someone to help talk things through.

With love,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Katie', written in a cursive style.