

# One thing never to say to a grieving friend

By [Jancee Dunn](#)

I have two friends who recently lost someone very close. As people have tried to comfort them, they've repeatedly heard the same phrase: "Everything happens for a reason."

This only makes them feel worse.

David Kessler, an author of several books on grief, heard the phrase a lot when he lost his son eight years ago. It made him feel isolated, frustrated and angry. He told me that he once pressed someone for an explanation. "I could use a good reason," he recalled saying.

It's easy to understand why we use phrases like this, said Joanne Cacciatore, a professor of social work at Arizona State University and the author of "Bearing the Unbearable." It's because we're uncomfortable. "We don't want to see that people are on their knees," she said.

Most of us haven't been taught how to handle other people's grief, added Alexandra Solomon, a psychologist at Northwestern University. "So we will reach for aphorisms and platitudes to fill in that space," she said.

But grief needs to be witnessed, not deflected, Kessler said. "And if I say to you, 'Everything happens for a reason,' I am missing your pain."

Still, it can be hard to find the right words. So I asked the experts for their advice.

## If you're grieving ...

When someone who is trying to comfort you accidentally makes things worse, your best response will depend on your relationship to the person and how you're feeling, Dr. Solomon said. She suggested saying: "I'm not there yet. I don't know if I ever will be. I'm just doing my best, day by day."

Dr. Cacciatore, who lost her daughter 30 years ago, has honed her own response: "Thank you for sharing, but that's not my truth."

## If you're trying to help ...

When you want to share words of comfort, Kessler suggested simply offering your support. You could say: "I am so sorry for your loss. I don't know how you feel, but I am here to help in any way I can." Or something like: "I am always just a phone call away. I am here for you."

You can also share a favorite memory of the person's loved one, Kessler said. "I tell people, 'Say their name. Tell a story,'" he said.

And because grief can sometimes strike early in the morning or late at night, Kessler added, you can tell people if you're available during those hours and that they can contact you if they need anything or want to talk.

## If you can't find the words ...

It turns out that we can learn a lot from animals, Dr. Cacciatore said.

In [a study](#) she led that examined how satisfied bereaved people were with their social support, she found that it wasn't therapists, social workers, family, friends or spiritual leaders who rated highest; people were most comforted by their pets.

"Without any words at all, animals showed up with their whole hearts and turned toward griever and their grief," Dr. Cacciatore said.

She told me that finding the right phrase isn't as important as being present and staying near. Then Dr. Cacciatore paused: "We really don't have to be encumbered by words," she said.