



What To Say To People After A Loss

Often the best language after loss does not involve words! Your presence, practical assistance and non-verbal gestures of caring are usually far more powerful and what is remembered.

Here are some tips when talking to grieving people after a loss. These tips come from 35 years of working with and listening to survivors about what was helpful to them:

- Remember that you can't fix it! It is their pain and grief journey.
- Practice a ministry of presence by being a quiet, non-anxious grief companion. This may be the greatest gift you can give them. You don't have to be talking all the time! Much of the time they will be lost internally in their thoughts and emotions. They know you are there and it means a lot if you are there in a way that is helpful to them.
- Assess what they may need. Don't assume that because they have family around that they know what to do or are helpful. Often they do not know, so asking them about specific things can help. Do they have someone to go with them to make funeral preparations, can you drive them somewhere, can you help clean the house before the relatives come, mow the lawn, or go grocery shopping for them. Remember that after a loss that people may have more difficulty making decisions and performing normal tasks. Life can feel very overwhelming after loss and trauma.
- Regardless of what you have experienced, even a significant loss, you do not know how that person feels. Do not say "I know how you feel" because you do not. You may be able to identify with their pain but every loss is different as are the circumstances. A replacement statement may be "I can't imagine how you are feeling but I've walked a similar journey."
- Limited self-disclosure is key. Grievers often find it helpful to be around others who have been through loss because they often do "get it." However, be aware of story hijacking. Too frequently it's easy to divert to your loss and how bad it was and what it was like for you. Just simply saying something like "My wife of 40 years just died last year. I'm so sorry. This lets them know you may understand more than others who have not had a major loss and they may then feel more open to talk with you at some point.
- Let them know that people need different things at different times. They may not be ready to talk about it right now. This is especially of introverts who may need to go internally longer to process it. Let them know that you are there when they are ready to talk and check back with them later.
- Above of all, be patient and loving toward them. Accept all of their emotions which may range broadly. These behaviors are the things that survivors remember the rest of their lives.