

Sabbatical Report Fall 2019
Nancy Jennings

Title: I Don't Know What to Say: Communicating about Grief and Loss

I want to begin this report with an interesting bit of irony. I began my sabbatical proposal with a project entitled, "The Happiness Project." I was intending to summarize the academic research I could find about what correlates with happiness and which of the variables individuals might have control over. My goal was to put together a unit for my Interpersonal Communication Course on happiness. Until this past April, I have literally been the happiest person I know. On April 17, 2018, my husband was killed in a bicycling accident. This sudden and tragic loss altered my normal positive perspective. I have put the Happiness Project on hold for now.

Since my husband's tragic death, I have learned a lot about how ill prepared most humans are to communicate about grief and loss. Many people have openly avoided talking to me. Those who do approach me generally express awkwardness. The comment I hear most often is, "I don't know what to say." In fact, before this loss, I didn't know what to say to someone who was grieving. My initial research into communicating about grief and loss supports my experience. According to Dr. M. Katherine Shear, MD, "Loss of a loved one is a natural, universally experienced life event, and at the same time, among life's most challenging experiences. Yet, in spite of the shared experience and strong social support, most bereaved people feel more alone than at any time in their lives." Although grief is a common experience, communicating about it is difficult for most people. The bereaved person often has trouble communicating about his or her needs and feelings. The loss can cause grievers to feel isolated from others and even abandoned by them. For example, according to Jenna Baddeley, "Bereaved parents often find that their social network abandons them altogether after the loss. Grief can be a double loss for people - the loss of a loved one and the deterioration of one's network of friends in the wake of the death" (Baddeley, 2010). Additionally, people have difficulty communicating with the grieving individual. According to Victoria Hospice, "People who have had no personal experience with loss and grief are unsure or unaware of how to help" (Victoria Hospice, 2011). People often avoid talking with grievers about the loss and may even avoid seeing or speaking with the griever altogether. According to *Successful Communication During Grieving*, many friends and family are stymied and uncomfortable about what to do or say to grieving relatives (Successful Communication, 2014.)

After having experienced the tragic and sudden loss of my husband of 25 years in April, I have discovered that communicating about grief and loss can be awkward and uncomfortable. Those of us who have experienced grief and loss feel awkward crying in public. We find ourselves apologizing for burdening people with our feelings. And we are often reluctant to ask people for help. I have been surprised to learn that most people feel awkward communicating with those who have suffered the loss. In the wake of my husband's death, I have had friends and colleagues avoid seeing or talking to me. I have gotten emails from people apologizing about how long it has taken them to reach out.

Those who talk to me in person say one of three things, and sometimes all of them: 1. I'm sorry for your loss 2. Is there anything I can do for you? Or 3. (this is the most common) I don't know what to say. The benefit of having gone through this tragedy in my life is that I now have some insight. Communicating about grief and loss is an important component of human communication that affects all humans at some point in their lives.

How to Communicate About Grief And Loss

People who have suffered grief and loss often have a difficult time communicating about their feelings and needs. All of us can learn how to communicate more effectively. Part of what has motivated me to do this research is that I am a college instructor and I believe this research will be helpful to my students. Students are inhibited from learning when they feel uncomfortable. They may avoid coming to class or drop out due to those feelings of discomfort around grief and loss. Sadly, I had a student share with me that he had a very difficult time communicating with others after the sudden loss of his father. He found himself feeling overwhelmed and isolated and he didn't know how to talk to other students about how he was feeling. He decided to drop out of college because of his feeling of isolation. Learning about how to deal with grief effectively can help students stay in college and to more actively and effectively engage with others. I want to be better at responding to my students and colleagues who may have suffered a loss. It will help me teach the subject of communication more effectively as I will have a deeper understanding of issues around grief and loss. I believe sharing my experience can help others. I have kept a journal in the form of a letter to my husband. Here is a relevant excerpt:

People keep telling me I am strong. I have never in my life thought of myself as strong. I know I have the ability to pull it together to take care of what I need to do—talk to the police, or the medical examiner's office. It's amazing how much love and support I have had from friends and colleagues. People have been calling me—perhaps 20 a day to offer comfort. That is kind and I find myself saying, "Thank you" with genuine sincerity. But most of them, while calling to offer comfort, end up needing comfort from me.

Talk about it

Talking about the loss is important for the grieving person. People will ask, "How are you?" and the griever has only a few seconds to assess whether the well-meaning friend or co-worker really wants to know. The griever wonders, "Should I tell them how much I am hurting and how hopeless I feel? Or should I just say, "I'm doing fine" and avoid the awkward conversation?" Research shows that how a listener feels about hearing the story of grief, depends on what type of grief story the griever tells. According to *Speaking of Grief* by Jenna Baddeley, "Grief stories that portray the loss as a devastating event evoke sympathy and concern but also make listeners feel more awkward and less accepting of the griever. Listeners are more comfortable with hearing about negative emotion if it is safely in the past, if the person has since recovered or managed to move out of the negative emotion into something better." Psychologist Dan McAdams calls these types of stories "Redemption stories." (Baddeley, 2010). Most listeners who are empathetic can

feel the griever's pain, and that makes them want to get away from the conversation. The griever should choose a few people they feel comfortable telling the whole truth to. Others who have suffered a similar loss are the most likely to truly understand the pain of the loss and will be willing to listen, no matter what type of grief story is being told. But for those listeners who are not as experienced with grief or who don't know us well, the griever should choose to tell a redemption story, in order to avoid discomfort or awkwardness.

Tips:

Don't expect too much from yourself. Be patient with yourself. In an interview, Eve Selis mentioned that a police officer told her "It takes 3 weeks after a loss before you can even breathe again." (Selis and Langley, 2019). Give yourself time to adjust to the reality of your new situation.

Understand that people don't know how to respond or what to say.

Be aware that listeners may get burned out. Try not to talk to the same person about your grief all the time.

Set boundaries. Turn off your phone when you need alone time.

Lower your expectations of others. Understand that most people have no idea what to say or do or how to help you. They want to be helpful and supportive, but just don't always know how.

Let them help

People want to help, but they don't always know what to do. When someone offers help, accept that help graciously. John Steinbeck said, "The nicest thing you can do for someone is to let them do something nice for you." If you do not ask for help, you are denying others the opportunity to help. (Selis and Langley, 2019). Ask for help with the more difficult tasks. According to Victoria Hospice Bereavement Services, "If you feel overwhelmed by the number of calls or inquiries from people, ask someone you trust to keep others informed of your needs and wishes and to receive messages on your behalf." (Victoria Hospice, 2011). Say yes to offers of help as much as you can. A grieving individual noted, "I say yes only when it gives me peace." (Selis and Langley, 2019).

Trust yourself.

The grieving person is the only one who really knows what he or she is feeling. Everyone grieves differently. According to Victoria Hospice, "As much as possible and as difficult as it might be, it's important to listen to and learn from your own heart. You may find that in the midst of your suffering and confusion, there is an inner wisdom that you can – and should – trust. This doesn't mean that you should ignore what others say; but it's important to weigh their opinions and advice against what you know about yourself." (Victoria Hospice, 2011.) I want to share a description of grieving, which I find particularly compelling and accurate. It is attributed only to "An old guy" and it appeared in response to a question about how to deal with the loss of a friend. The "old guy" writes:

As for grief, you'll find it comes in waves. When the ship is first wrecked, you're drowning, with wreckage all around you. Everything floating around you reminds you of the beauty and the magnificence of the ship that was, and is no more. And all you can do is float. You find some piece of wreckage and you hang on for a while. Maybe it's some physical thing. Maybe it's a happy memory or a photograph. Maybe it's a person who is also floating. For a while all you can do is float. Stay Alive. In the beginning, the waves are 100 feet tall and crash over you without mercy. They come 10 seconds apart and don't even give you time to catch your breath. All you can do is hang on and float. After a while, maybe weeks, maybe months, you'll find the waves are still 100 feet tall, but they come further apart. When they come, they still crash all over you and wipe you out. But in between you can breathe, you can function. You never know what's going to trigger the grief. It might be a song, a picture, a street intersection, the smell of a cup of coffee. It can be just about anything... and the waves comes crashing. But in between waves, there is life. Somewhere down the line, and its different for everybody, you find the waves are only 80 feet tall. Or 50 feet tall. And while they still come, they come further apart. You can see them coming. An anniversary, a birthday, or Christmas, or landing at O'Hare. You can see it coming, for the most part, and prepare yourself. And when it washes over you, you know that somehow, you will again, come out the other side. Soaking wet, sputtering, still hanging on to some tiny piece of the wreckage, but you'll come out. Take it from an old guy. The waves never stop coming, and somehow, you don't really want them to. But you learn that you'll survive them. And other waves will come. And you'll survive them too. If you're lucky, you'll have lots of scars from lots of loves. And lots of shipwrecks." (Reddit, 2014)

Get professional help if you need it.

Look for help from the experts: Grief Counselors, therapists, and grief support groups.

How To Communicate With Those Who Have Suffered A Loss

Listen

Grievers need to talk about their feelings. They may need to tell their story over and over. Don't interrupt to offer advice. Just listen. Let them know you heard them and validate their pain. Don't try to "fix" the situation. "I can see how sad you feel," or, "That must have been really hard for you," acknowledge how the person feels. Nothing you can say will take the pain away. Rather than asking, "How are you?" which can seem like an overwhelming question, say, "I am thinking of you. If you feel like talking about how you are feeling I am here to listen." Be there to listen more than talk. By simply asking, "Do you feel like talking?" you're letting your loved one know that you're available to listen (Smith, Robinson, and Seagal, 2018). Be there for the person when they need you. Don't avoid the grieving person. You don't have to worry about saying the right thing;

the most important thing you can do is to be there for them (Smith, Robinson, and Seagal, 2018).

Encourage the griever to talk about the deceased person. Most grievers find joy in talking about or hearing positive stories about their loved one.

Friends came over to have dinner with me and my sons one evening shortly after Brian's death. We were happy to have the company. Whenever I mentioned my husband's name, the conversation would cease and people would look uncomfortable. I finally realized they thought talking about him was making me sad. The exact opposite was true; in fact, talking about Brian and what a special person he was is the only thing that has made me feel happy since his loss.

What To Say

There really isn't any specific thing you can say to help the grieving individual. People often say, "I'm sorry for your loss." That is a nice sentiment and as such, is welcome. It is probably most helpful to say, "I'm here for you." Let them know its ok to fall apart. (Selis and Langley, 2019).

What NOT To Say

Avoid clichés that are designed to help the griever feel better, such as, "He or she is in a better place" or "You will heal with time." While these sound like they offer comfort, the danger is they ignore or minimize the pain. You want to encourage the griever to keep sharing, rather than shutting off the conversation by giving advice.

Grieving people appreciate phone calls. Call when you can be positive and supportive and be prepared to listen. Don't call the grieving person and then fall apart. It puts a burden on the griever to comfort you. "There were a lot of people I had to call and inform about the loss. It was very difficult. The women, for the most part, felt sorry and expressed empathy. The men were the ones who fell apart." (Selis and Langley, 2019).

Don't try to compare one loss to another. It will end up minimizing the loss. "Loss is loss and pain is pain." (Selis and Langley, 2019). The questions that are the most difficult to answer are the ones that start with "Why?" Analyzing why the death happened is generally a bad road to go down. "If only..." is also a type of statement that is not productive. When grieving, you cannot go backward and change things or prevent them. You can only move forward.

Avoid saying insensitive things in an effort to help the griever. Below are some examples (Sherwood, 2011).

I know how you feel. Unfortunately, you can't know exactly how another person feels. Instead, you might say, "I have had a similar experience and I can share some of what helped me through it."

You can always get another husband, baby, job, pet, etc. The griever isn't interested in a replacement, they want the beloved person or thing they have lost back.

He/She is with God now Don't assume the griever believes in God, or even if they do, finds the idea of God comforting, as they may be thinking that God deprived them of someone they loved dearly and may be feeling betrayed by God. Follow the lead of the grieving person in discussing religion.

Avoid statements that begin with "You should" or "You will." Instead you could begin your comments with: "Have you thought about..." or "You might try..." (Smith, Robinson, and Seagal, 2018).

Help, but make it easy for the griever

People who are grieving receive a lot of messages of support—cards, emails, texts and phone calls. While these messages are helpful, the grieving person may feel burdened by having to respond to all of the messages, which can be difficult emotionally. When you reach out via a call or email or text, let the grieving person know you don't expect a call or message back. Say something like this: "I am calling to let you know I'm thinking of you and I'm here if you need anything. No need to reply; I know you are probably overwhelmed right now. I am here for you any time you want to talk." The grieving person is sometimes so busy with tasks and visitors and at the same time emotionally distraught that it is difficult for them to make specific plans or sometimes even to know what they want. So offer to help, but make it as easy as possible for the grieving individual. A tip from a recent interview on NPR, for example suggested rather than call someone who is grieving and ask, "Can I pick up dinner for you and your family?" or "What do you want for dinner?" It might be more effective and less overwhelming to ask, "What sort of pizza do you and your family like best?" or "What do any of you hate on a hamburger?" These questions make it easy for the grieving individuals to accept offers of help. These questions avoid placing the burden of decision making on the grieving individual.

It is common for people to say to a griever, "If there is anything I can do to help, please let me know. The griever often does not always know what they need. It might be more helpful to offer to help with a specific task. According to HELPGUIDE.ORG, here are some tasks you might offer to help with:

Shop for groceries or run errands

Drop off a casserole or other type of food

Help with memorial service arrangements

Stay in your loved one's home to take phone calls and receive guests

Help with insurance forms or bills

Take care of housework, such as cleaning or laundry

Watch their children or pick them up from school

Drive your loved one wherever they need to go

Look after your loved one's pets

Go with them to a support group meeting

Accompany them on a walk

Take them to lunch or a movie

Share an enjoyable activity (sport, game, puzzle, art project)

Crying in Public

Crying in public is inevitable. People who are grieving may feel a burst of grief without warning. Strangers don't know what to do or how to help the grieving person.

Several times out in public, I have found myself feeling hopeless or distraught. It happens most often in the greeting card section of the grocery store. I try to wait until it recedes so that I can go through the checkout line without upsetting people. But sometimes I can't stop. And I can't stay in the store indefinitely, so I just have to check out while tears are pouring down my face. Generally strangers look away, and pretend they don't see what is happening. The checker at the grocery store actually looked at the ceiling as she scanned my groceries while I stood there and sobbed. The guy behind me got very interested in something on his phone. The store was full of people and they all were more comfortable pretending I was not there at all. The other day, I was picking up some framed artwork at the art supply store. It was my birthday and I was feeling particularly sensitive and vulnerable. The cashier saw that something was wrong and asked, very gently, "Do you want to talk about it?" I was touched by this act of kindness. And it genuinely lightened my grief to be able to talk about it.

What I genuinely needed was someone to look at me and ask, "are you ok?" or, "Do you want to talk about it?" Even a gentle hand on my shoulder or the offer of a tissue would have made a huge difference. I believe now that if I encountered someone crying in public, I would likely touch their arm or shoulder and gently ask exactly that question, "Do you want to talk about it?" or possibly ask, "Would you like a hug?" A hug at those times would have been most welcome. Of course, not everyone wants a hug from a stranger. Not everyone wants to share their story of grief with a stranger. But if I offer, at

least it gives them the opportunity to receive some comfort or kindness if they want it. The grieving person can always say, “No, thank you.”

Flowers and Plants

Sending flowers and plants is a thoughtful gesture, but don't send them all at once. Coordinate with others and try to stagger the arrival of the flowers. They are overwhelming when they all come at once. People don't think about how much maintenance is involved in taking care of flowers. The flowers will also likely die all at once. Consider sending a monetary gift or a gift card instead of flowers. The griever may need help paying for food or other memorial service expenses. If you send flowers, consider sending them one or two weeks after the loss. The flowers will come after most of the others are gone and will help brighten the griever's life after most of the visitors are gone.

I think I received 11 bouquets in the two days following the death of my husband. They were beautiful and I enjoyed them, of course. But they took about an hour a day of maintenance: watering, pulling out dead leaves and flowers. Then I had to throw out the bouquets and wash the vases. Where do you store 11 vases?

Holidays, birthdays, and anniversaries are especially difficult.

Offer extra support on special days. Particular days of the year will be especially difficult and painful for your grieving friend or family member. Holidays, family milestones, birthdays, and anniversaries often reawaken grief. Reach out to the griever on those difficult days. Let the griever know that you're there for whatever they need.

Be patient with grief

Understand that grief takes time. The griever may have a lot of support shortly after the loss occurs. They may need that support in the following weeks and months, after the shock and numbness have worn off (Sherwood, 2011).

Don't judge the griever or take their grief reactions personally. People who have suffered a loss will have times when they are emotional for no apparent reason. They may have a shorter fuse than usual.

I have had a number of unpleasant conversations with Discover Card. I really hate that I am the type of person who will say unkind things to people on the phone who are convinced they are just doing their jobs. I am so fragile and thin skinned. I feel like I am always about to cry or lash out. I keep having to apologize to people for being so sensitive.

Nonverbal communication

You can let the person know you care by offering a hug or a reassuring touch. Eye contact is also critically important when you are listening to the griever. According to *Successful Communication During Grieving*, using nonverbal communication that shows you care about the griever is important. For example, the author noted hospice nurses used successful nonverbal communication. “Their eye contact, appropriate facial expressions, and handshakes, touch, or hugs communicate the care, compassion, and concern that is so essential to this noble profession.”(Successfully Speaking 2014).

Abnormal Grief

Not all grief is equal. According to *Words That Made a Difference* by Lena Holmberg, It is important to recognize that some grievers may be more distraught than others. If the death was a child, or a sudden tragedy, the grief process may be more difficult and complicated for those grievers. Some grievers are more high risk than others and may require more intensive treatment. (Holmberg, 2007). Some extreme forms of grief are considered “abnormal grief.” According to *Grief* by Ringold, Cassio, and Glass, three abnormal responses to grief include: Complicated Grief, Major Depressive Disorder, and Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. (Ringold, Cassio, and Glass, 2005). Complicated Grief is defined as grief in which the “Emotions are particularly long-lasting or severe and include inability to accept the loved one's death, persistent thoughts regarding the death, and preoccupation with thoughts about the loved one.” Individuals suffering from abnormal grief require more than normal listening and support. These types of grief should be treated through counseling with a psychiatrist or psychologist, support groups or even medication (Ringold, Cassio, and Glass, 2005). According to HELPGUIDE.ORG, “Encourage the grieving person to seek professional help if you observe any of the following warning signs after the initial grieving period—especially if it’s been over two months since the death.

1. Difficulty functioning in daily life
2. Extreme focus on the death
3. Excessive bitterness, anger, or guilt
4. Neglecting personal hygiene
5. Alcohol or drug abuse
6. Inability to enjoy life
7. Hallucinations
8. Withdrawing from others
9. Constant feelings of hopelessness
10. Talking about dying or suicide

It can be tricky to bring up your concerns to the bereaved person as you don’t want to be perceived as invasive. Instead of telling the person what to do, try stating your own

feelings: “I am troubled by the fact that you aren’t sleeping—perhaps you should look into getting help.” (Smith, Robinson, and Seagal, 2018).

Hope

It is helpful to know that, although it does take time, we will heal. We will never be the same, of course, but we will heal. And we will find positive changes in our lives. Many individuals who have lost a loved one express a renewed sense of appreciation for the moments in their lives. One griever noted, “I am living my best life. I can ask who am I going to be today?” Another said, “Now I look for love everywhere.” She sees heart shapes all around her, wherever she looks. And that reminds her of how much love there is in the world. (Selis and Langley, 2019).

Supplemental Material Attached: Course Unit on Grief and Loss

Revisions For the Course Outline for Interpersonal Communication

The unit on communicating about grief and loss will arm students with tools that add practical applicable life skills to compliment the theories they learn in class. it will help them communicate more effectively about grief and loss. Students will feel more comfortable communicating with people who are suffering from grief and loss. Knowing how to communicate effectively with others will make them feel more confident and less awkward. They will be better able to help support people who are experiencing grief. And when they experience loss themselves, they will be better able to cope as they have had some education on the subject.

I Don't Know What To Say Workshop

I have developed the research into a 3 hour workshop for the district and the community.

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Course Unit For Interpersonal Communication

“I Don’t Know What To Say” Communicating About Grief and Loss

NOTE: After each question mark, there is an opportunity for the students to fill in their own responses to the prompts. Some people are very uncomfortable talking about the topic and may be reluctant to respond. So don’t push them. If there are no responses, the instructor can fill them in.

Personal Examples are in *italics*. Feel free to use them or substitute your own experiences.

Intro

By a show of hands, who here has lost a pet?
Who has lost a grandparent?
A parent?
Sibling?
A partner?
A child?

We all experience loss
And yet, talking about it is terribly difficult for most of us.
Why is that?

When we hear a friend has lost someone, we want to call, visit, send a card, support the person in some way. We agonize over what to say, hesitate to call, delay the interaction. When I lost my husband in a bicycle accident, I had a series of interesting reactions. People who know me well, and people who didn’t all said the same series of things. Those of you who have experienced a loss know what they are. Can you guess?

I’m sorry for your loss
If there is anything I can do to help....
Or I don’t know what to say

A couple of times, I actually saw someone coming my way. They saw me, realized who it was, then turned to walk in a different direction, in order to avoid talking to me.

Grief is a universal experience, yet we don’t know how to talk about it.

This unit will cover helpful tips for communicating about grief.
First, how to talk to people when you have experienced a loss.
Then, how to talk to someone else who has experienced a loss.

PART ONE: For Those Who Are Grieving

As we agreed above, all of us have experienced some sort of loss. If some of you have not yet lost someone close to you, you still want to know how to communicate when you are grieving. Sadly, all of us will have this experience at some point in our lives.

TIPS for those who are grieving

People who have suffered grief and loss often have a difficult time communicating about their feelings and needs.

All of us can learn how to communicate more effectively. Students are inhibited from learning when they feel uncomfortable. They may avoid coming to class or drop out due to those feelings of discomfort around grief and loss.

Sadly, I had a student share with me that he had a very difficult time communicating with others after the sudden loss of his father. He found himself feeling overwhelmed and isolated and he didn't know how to talk to other students about how he was feeling. He decided to drop out of college because of his feeling of isolation.

Learning about how to deal with grief effectively can help students stay in college and to more actively and effectively engage with others. I want to be better at responding to my students and colleagues who may have suffered a loss. I believe sharing my experience can help others.

Most importantly, Talk about it

Talking about the loss is important for the grieving person.

People will reflexively ask, "How are you?" and the griever has only a few seconds to assess whether the well-meaning friend or co-worker really wants to know. The griever wonders, "Should I tell them how much I am hurting and how hopeless I feel? Or should I just say, "I'm doing fine" and avoid the awkward conversation?" It isn't your problem to deal with the other person's discomfort. They did ask, so feel free to talk. If the listener is uncomfortable, it is on them to say so, or to leave the conversation if they have to. Most listeners who are empathetic can feel the griever's pain, and that may make them want to get away from the conversation. The griever should choose a few people they feel comfortable telling the whole truth to. Others who have suffered a similar loss are the most likely to truly understand the pain of the loss and will be willing to listen.

Don't expect too much from yourself.

Be patient with yourself. After a tragic and sudden loss, a friend told me that a police officer told her "It takes 3 weeks after a loss before you can even breathe again."

Give yourself time to adjust to the reality of your new situation.

Understand that people don't know how to respond or what to say.

Be aware that listeners may get burned out. Try not to talk to the same person about your grief all the time.

Set boundaries.

Turn off your phone when you need alone time.

Lower your expectations of others. Understand that most people have no idea what to say or do or how to help you. They want to be helpful and supportive, but just don't always know how.

Let them help

People want to help, but they don't always know what to do. When someone offers help, accept that help graciously. John Steinbeck said, "The nicest thing you can do for someone is to let them do something nice for you." If you do not ask for help, you are denying others the opportunity to help.

Ask for help with the more difficult tasks.

If you feel overwhelmed by the number of calls or inquiries from people, ask someone you trust to keep others informed of your needs and wishes and to receive messages on your behalf.

Say yes to offers of help as much as you can. A grieving individual noted, "I say yes only when it gives me peace."

Trust yourself.

The grieving person is the only one who really knows what he or she is feeling.

Everyone grieves differently. As much as possible and as difficult as it might be, it's important to listen to and learn from your own heart. You may find that in the midst of your suffering and confusion, there is an inner wisdom that you can – and should – trust. This doesn't mean that you should ignore what others say; but it's important to weigh their opinions and advice against what you know about yourself."

Get professional help if you need it.

Look for help from the experts: Grief Counselors, therapists, and grief support groups.

Activity – OLD GUY

Please read through this description of grief from “An old guy” on Reddit. Reflect on what you read. In your regular groups, please address the following questions:

1. Is this an accurate description of grief, in your experience?
2. What is an example of a “piece of wreckage” that you have or could hold onto?
3. How does reading this help someone who is grieving (if at all?)

The “old guy” writes:

As for grief, you'll find it comes in waves. When the ship is first wrecked, you're drowning, with wreckage all around you. Everything floating around you reminds you of the beauty and the magnificence of the ship that was, and is no more. And all you can do is float. You find some piece of wreckage and you hang on for a while. Maybe it's some physical thing. Maybe it's a happy memory or a photograph. Maybe it's a person who is also floating. For a while all you can do is float. Stay Alive. In the beginning, the waves are 100 feet tall and crash over you without mercy. They come 10 seconds apart and don't even give you time to catch your breath. All you can do is hang on and float. After a while, maybe weeks, maybe months, you'll find the waves are still 100 feet tall, but they come further apart. When they come, they still crash all over you and wipe you out. But in between you can breathe, you can function. You never know what's going to trigger the grief. It might be a song, a picture, a street intersection, the smell of a cup of coffee. It can be just about anything... and the waves comes crashing. But in between waves, there is life. Somewhere down the line, and its different for everybody, you find the waves are only 80 feet tall. Or 50 feet tall. And while they still come, they come further apart. You can see them coming. An anniversary, a birthday, or Christmas, or landing at O'Hare. You can see it coming, for the most part, and prepare yourself. And when it washes over you, you know that somehow, you will again, come out the other side. Soaking wet, sputtering, still hanging on to some tiny piece of the wreckage, but you'll come out. Take it from an old guy. The waves never stop coming, and somehow, you don't really want them to. But you learn that you'll survive them. And other waves will come. And you'll survive them too. If you're lucky, you'll have lots of scars from lots of loves. And lots of shipwrecks.” (Reddit, 2014)

PART TWO: How to Communicate With Those Who Have Suffered A Loss

Listen

Grievers need to talk about their feelings.

They may need to tell their story over and over. Don't interrupt to offer advice. Just listen. Let them know you heard them and validate their pain. Don't try to "fix" the situation. Acknowledge how the person feels.

Good things to say in response:

I can see how sad you feel

That must have been really hard for you

Nothing you can say will take the pain away. Rather than asking, "How are you?" which can seem like an overwhelming question, say, "I am thinking of you. If you feel like talking about how you are feeling I am here to listen." Be there to listen more than talk.

By simply asking, "Do you feel like talking?" you're letting your loved one know that you're available to listen. Be there for the person when they need you. Don't avoid the grieving person. You don't have to worry about saying the right thing; the most important thing you can do is to be there for them.

Encourage the griever to talk about the deceased person.

Most grievers find joy in talking about or hearing positive stories about their loved one.

Friends came over to have dinner with me and my sons one evening shortly after my husband's death. We were happy to have the company. Whenever I mentioned my husband's name, the conversation would cease and people would look uncomfortable. I finally realized they thought talking about him was making me sad. The exact opposite was true; in fact, talking about my husband and what a special person he was is the only thing that has made me feel happy since his loss.

Grieving people appreciate phone calls, but don't make the griever comfort you.

Call when you can be positive and supportive and be prepared to listen. Don't call the grieving person and then fall apart. It puts a burden on the griever to comfort you.

Don't try to compare one loss to another. It will end up minimizing the loss. Loss is loss and pain is pain.

What To Say

There really isn't any specific thing you can say to help the grieving individual. People often say, "I'm sorry for your loss." That is a nice sentiment and as such, is welcome. It is probably most helpful to say, "I'm here for you," or "I care about you." Let them know its ok to cry.

What NOT To Say

He or she is in a better place

Avoid clichés that are designed to help the griever feel better.

You will heal with time

While these sound like they offer comfort, the danger is they ignore or minimize the pain. You want to encourage the griever to keep sharing, rather than shutting off the conversation by giving advice.

I know how you feel Unfortunately, you can't know exactly how another person feels. Instead, you might say, "I have had a similar experience and I can share some of what helped me through it."

You can always get another husband, baby, job, pet, etc. Yes, people actually say things like that. The griever isn't interested in a replacement, (especially not right now). They want the beloved person or thing they have lost back.

He/She is with God now Don't assume the griever believes in God, or even if they do they may or may not find the idea of God comforting right now. Some grievers do, of course, and will take comfort in religious rituals and observances, but don't assume they will. They may be thinking that God deprived them of someone they loved dearly and may be feeling betrayed by God. Follow the lead of the grieving person in discussing religion.

Avoid statements that begin with "You should" or "You will." Instead you could begin your comments with: "Have you thought about..." or "You might try..."

Help, but make it easy for the griever

People who are grieving receive a lot of messages of support—cards, emails, texts and phone calls. While these messages are helpful, the grieving person may feel burdened by having to respond to all of the messages, which can be difficult emotionally.

When you reach out via a call or email or text, **let the grieving person know you don't expect a call or message back.** Say something like this: "I am calling to let you know I'm thinking of you and I'm here if you need anything. No need to reply; I know you are probably overwhelmed right now. I am here for you any time you want to talk."

Offer to help, but make it as easy as possible for the grieving individual.

The grieving person is sometimes so busy with tasks and visitors and at the same time emotionally distraught that it is difficult for them to make specific plans or sometimes even to know what they want. Rather than call someone who is grieving and ask, "Can I pick up dinner for you and your family?" or "What do you want for dinner?" It might be more effective and less overwhelming to ask, "What sort of pizza do you and your family like best?" or "What do any of you hate on a hamburger?" These questions make it easy

for the grieving individuals to accept offers of help. These questions avoid placing the burden of decision making on the grieving individual.

What can I do to help?

It is common for people to say to a griever, “If there is anything I can do to help, please let me know. The griever often does not always know what they need. It might be more helpful to offer to help with a specific task. Here are some tasks you might offer to help with:

Shop for groceries or run errands

Drop off a casserole or other type of food

Help with memorial service arrangements

Stay in your loved one’s home to take phone calls and receive guests

Help with insurance forms or bills

Take care of housework, such as cleaning or laundry

Watch their children or pick them up from school

Drive them wherever they need to go

Look after their pets

Go with them to a support group meeting

Accompany them on a walk

Take them to lunch or a movie

Share an enjoyable activity (sport, game, puzzle, art project)

Crying in Public

Crying in public is inevitable. People who are grieving may feel a burst of grief without warning. Strangers don’t know what to do or how to help the grieving person.

Several times out in public, I have found myself feeling hopeless or distraught. It happens most often in the greeting card section of the grocery store. I try to wait until it recedes so that I can go through the checkout line without upsetting people. But sometimes I can’t

stop. And I can't stay in the store indefinitely, so I just have to check out while tears are pouring down my face. Generally strangers look away, and pretend they don't see what is happening. The checker at the grocery store actually looked at the ceiling as she scanned my groceries while I stood there and sobbed. The guy behind me got very interested in something on his phone. The store was full of people and they all were more comfortable pretending I was not there at all. The other day I was at a store and I was feeling particularly sensitive and vulnerable. The cashier saw that something was wrong and asked, very gently, "Do you want to talk about it?" I was touched by this act of kindness. And it genuinely lightened my grief to be able to talk about it.

Don't be afraid to ask, "are you ok?" or, "Do you want to talk about it?"

Even a gentle hand on the person's shoulder or the offer of a tissue could make a huge difference. If you encounter someone crying in public, touch their arm or shoulder and gently ask, "Do you want to talk about it?" or possibly ask, "Would you like a hug?" Of course, not everyone wants a hug from a stranger. Not everyone wants to share their story of grief with a stranger. But if you offer, at least it gives them the opportunity to receive some comfort or kindness if they want it. The grieving person can always say, "No, thank you."

Flowers and Plants

Sending flowers and plants is a thoughtful gesture, but don't send them all at once. Coordinate with others and try to stagger the arrival of the flowers. They are overwhelming when they all come at once. People don't think about how much maintenance is involved in taking care of flowers. The flowers will also likely die all at once. Consider sending a monetary gift or a gift card instead of flowers. The griever may need help paying for food or other memorial service expenses. If you send flowers, consider sending them one or two weeks after the loss. The flowers will come after most of the others are gone and will help brighten the griever's life after most of the visitors are gone.

I think I received 11 bouquets in the two days following the death of my husband. They were beautiful and I enjoyed them, of course. But they took about an hour a day of maintenance: watering, pulling out dead leaves and flowers. Then I had to throw out the bouquets and wash the vases. Where do you store 11 vases?

Holidays, birthdays, and anniversaries are especially difficult.

Offer extra support on special days. Particular days of the year will be especially difficult and painful for your grieving friend or family member. Holidays, family milestones, birthdays, and anniversaries often reawaken grief. Reach out to the griever on those difficult days. Let the griever know that you're there for whatever they need.

Be patient with grief

Understand that grief takes time. The griever may have a lot of support shortly after the loss occurs. They may need that support in the following weeks and months, after the shock and numbness have worn off.

Don't judge the griever or take their grief reactions personally.

People who have suffered a loss will have times when they are emotional for no apparent reason. They may have a shorter fuse than usual.

Nonverbal communication

You can let the person know you care by offering a hug or a reassuring touch. Eye contact is also critically important when you are listening to the griever.

Abnormal Grief

Not all grief is equal. It is important to recognize that some grievers may be more distraught than others. If the death was a child, or a sudden tragedy, the grief process may be more difficult and complicated for those grievers. Some grievers are more high risk than others and may require more intensive treatment. Some extreme forms of grief are:

11. Difficulty functioning in daily life
12. Excessive bitterness, anger, or guilt
13. Neglecting personal hygiene
14. Alcohol or drug abuse
15. Withdrawing from others
16. Constant feelings of hopelessness
17. Talking about dying or suicide

It can be tricky to bring up your concerns to the grieving person. Instead of telling the person what to do, try stating your own feelings: "I am worried about the fact that you aren't sleeping—maybe you should think about getting help."

Hope

It is helpful to know that, although it does take time, we will heal. We will never be the same, of course, but we will heal. And we will find positive changes in our lives. Many individuals who have lost a loved one express a renewed sense of appreciation for the moments in their lives. One griever noted, "I am living my best life. I can ask who am I going to be today?" Another said, "Now I look for love everywhere." She sees heart shapes all around her, wherever she looks. And that reminds her of how much love there is in the world.

Activity – WHAT CAN I DO?

On a piece of paper, write (number your responses)

1. Three things you can do to help someone who is grieving
2. One thing you should NOT say to someone who is grieving
3. One thing you SHOULD say to someone who is grieving
4. Answer the following question in two or more sentences: What is something on the list that I think would have actually helped me when I was grieving and why?
OR, if you have not experienced any significant grief, what is something on the list that you think would actually help and why?