

Advice on What's Helpful to Say and What Not to Do When Someone's Grieving

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We've all heard them. Or said them. The phrases uttered after an awkward silence to a hurting friend: "She's finally at peace;" "God needed him;" and yes, even, "Everything happens for a reason..." Or nothing is said at all. Days, weeks, months go by and it is business as usual, except for the avoidance of eye contact or a pitying glance.

A person suffering a loss or serious illness can find him or herself caught between a rock and a hard place when it comes to disclosing their situation. Do they let others in and risk being on the receiving end of detailed accounts of the trauma of others or being barraged by medical and other advice? Or, do they preserve the shred of normalcy still left by putting up protective walls, at the high price of forfeiting needed

support?

Of course, most of us want to offer genuine support to those who are in pain. Why is it so hard to get it right? Members of my Spousal Bereavement group at The Center for HOPE show a great deal of insight into the situation. As one young widower commented, “I can’t judge others for feeling awkward, because until my wife got sick, that’s how it was for me. I didn’t know what to do with myself at funerals and wakes. So I feel for others now who don’t know how to be around me.”

When it comes to illness, loss, and suffering, avoidance is sadly the norm. Other cultures, more at home with life transitions, invite daily reflection upon one’s own mortality; special mentorship/saging roles are assigned to elders, and the end of life is prepared for and experienced at home. In our society, however, the ill, the aging and the dying are often pushed out of the public eye. Many of us put off planning for the inevitabilities of end of life. We keep the idea of becoming ill at arms’ length.

Thus, we tend to separate ourselves from those who are vulnerable or bereft. Illness and death happen to others; not to us. It’s not that we plan to be this way. It’s just how we’ve learned unconsciously to defend ourselves from pain, but as we become more aware, we can choose to learn to tolerate our own discomfort, so we can better “show up” for ourselves and for one another.

On the flip side of pushing those in pain away, many of us feel a compulsion to do something, to fix things. Many of us have trouble accepting our relative powerlessness in the face of suffering. A client of mine expressed huge relief when I let her know it was okay to simply feel weak, defeated and afraid. Her well-meaning friends had been insisting she keep her spirits “up,” and reminding her of how “strong” she was. However, sometimes what’s needed most, what truly heals, is a good, long cry, or just being held.

One of the most valued aspects of attending a support group is being with others who can say, “I know what you are going through.” This doesn’t mean those of us who do not have first-hand experience can’t also offer valued support. When asked what is most helpful, clients recalled being told: “I know how much he loved you,” and “He always talked about you,” or “I’ve been thinking of you.” “Is there anything I can do?” And they appreciated the honest “I don’t know what to say.”

One member laughed gently, as she recalled a young realtor who’d been through her own hard times, taking her aside at an open house to say, “You’re going to need tissues and sunglasses for the car.”

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