

FOR YOU AND YOUR LOVED ONES

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When words come out wrong

Responding to troubling news is tough, but we should learn how to do it right. **Irene S. Levine** offers some advice.

IT HAPPENS ALL TOO OFTEN. Someone tells you something that gives you a jolt. You're at a loss for words, but you naturally want to be kind, so you try to be consoling. And get it so, so wrong.

Saying or doing the right thing for a troubled friend isn't always instinctive. "It's a skill, and like any skill it's one you need to learn and practice," says Robbie Miller Kaplan, author of *How to Say It: When You Don't Know What to Say* (Berkeley Publishing Group). That means thinking ahead and learning the rules.

Listen first

When you are face to face with someone who has experienced a tragedy or loss, it's normal to feel flummoxed. Don't worry about sounding eloquent; just be honest. Acknowledge that you care, that you aren't sure what to say, and that you want to listen. Don't ask invasive questions, or volunteer your own story of grief.

"Keep the focus on the other person's problems entirely," advises Bill Lampton, Ph.D., a communications coach and author of *The Complete Communicator* (Hillsboro Press). "Empathic listening will accomplish far more than words," he says. "When they're sad or frightened, people need a listener, not a lecture."

Know what not to say

It might seem counter-intuitive, but don't presume to tell another person that you know how they feel, says Dr. Lampton. Even if you have experienced a similar situation, you don't really know how a trauma affects another person, he says.

This isn't the time for platitudes, either. Time does usually heal, but people who

are suffering may think it unimaginable that their sorrow will pass. Telling them so won't change that.

Questions can also be a slippery slope. Several years ago, a friend's life partner was diagnosed in his 60s with Pick's disease, a rare degenerative condition that affects language and judgment. Those around her were supportive but many asked the same irksome question that always brought her to tears: "Does he recognize who you are?"

If all these warnings about what not to say leave you tongue-tied, it's generally safe to stick with a simple message: "I care and I'm here for you if you need me."

Show, don't tell

It's a natural response to feel like you want to fix things, says Joshua Estrin, director of the Lupus Foundation of America and a practicing psychotherapist. But, he says, rather than giving advice or responding directly to what you've heard, it's best to focus on empathy: show that you care.

"There is no magic thing you can say that will make an individual feel better," says Kaplan. "They will feel comforted by

a personal note from you, a phone call or a visit. The simplest things can bring such comfort: a special loaf of bread, or some fresh coffee to brew. The thoughtfulness will warm their heart for days."

Reach out

Sometimes we learn of bad news from afar. You may read in the local newspaper that a friend's son has been arrested, or hear at church that a neighbor's husband has left her. Don't avoid the person affected.

Julie Michener has experienced loss more than once. First, her mother died from complications from Alzheimer's disease. A few years later, her supervisor at work died suddenly of a heart attack. She realized that what matters at these times is that friends do something – anything – to let the person know they're thinking of her.

"It's easy to think you don't want to bother folks, or interrupt their making plans for services," says Michener, who works in the media department of the College of St. Catherine in Minneapolis. "But having been on the other side, no communication, however small, goes unnoticed or unappreciated."

When Michener's mother died, she knew that none of her colleagues could attend the funeral 300 miles away. "I just can't tell you how much it meant to me to find a peace lily from my co-workers at my mother's service," she says. "It was like a warm blanket thrown over my shoulders."

As Kaplan says, "The best thing you can do is hug the individual and let them know how sorry you are." Most important of all, though, don't let your fear of saying the wrong thing mean you say or do nothing, in spite of your good intentions. ☺

What to say, what not to say: a few guidelines

- Don't feel bad or guilty about what you can't change: focus instead on what you *can* do to help.
- Tame your curiosity: it's not about finding out about every last symptom.
- A little humor, if appropriate, can sometimes go a long way – and so can a big hug.
- Sometimes, you may not need to say anything, just be a good listener.



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