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What to say in difficult times

It's tough to know how to comfort someone grieving a death, going through a divorce or navigating a job loss. These tips will help you know what to say to a friend who's suffering.

By Jackie Middleton



A friend has a baby, your sister gets engaged, or your coworker scores a promotion—you know what to say, right? But when a friend or family member experiences an upsetting situation, you might be unsure about how to provide comfort. Don't be lost for words when they're needed the most. Here's what to say during three difficult life events.

Death of a loved one

People often disappear when someone dies—not out of malice or disinterest, but because they don't know how to handle it. “The saddest part about grieving is that it's an isolating experience. No one knows what to do so they just pull away and avoid contact,” says Ashley Hoogenberg, a registered psychologist and certified grief recovery specialist in Edmonton. You may be worried that it will make the griever sad if you ask about the death, but it won't. “They already have those feelings,” says Hoogenberg.

What to say

Instead of going mum, convey your condolences. “One of the greatest things you can say to a griever is, ‘I can't imagine what this is like for you,’” says Hoogenberg. The reason? “‘Imagine’

is an open ended word; you're not making assumptions about what it's like for them," she says.

What not to say

Hoogenberg advises against saying 'I know how you feel' to a griever. "Naturally we want to compare losses, but we can't. Even if we've had similar experiences, we'll never truly understand what it's like for them." You should also avoid saying 'he's in a better place,' 'he's no longer in pain', or 'he's now with God'—all of which take attention away from the grieving process, the griever and the person who died. The griever needs to face their grief, not ignore it or lessen its blow with dismissive statements.

What to do

It's also kind to offer assistance. "When we're grieving we have a hard time asking for help," says Hoogenberg. A specific offer—not a generic 'I'm here if you need anything'—is most helpful and appreciated. Grievers often feel overwhelmed and don't know what support they need. Suggest driving their kids to and from school, looking after their pets for the week, bringing over a hot meal, or doing their laundry.

A friend is getting divorced

Divorce is more than just the end of a romantic relationship. "It's the loss of familiarity, comfort and routine. A person might have to leave their home. Everything changes in their life," says Hoogenberg.

What to say

To be supportive during this upheaval, Hoogenberg recommends saying things like 'I'm sorry that this has happened; do you want to talk about it?' and 'do you need any help looking for a new place or a good lawyer?' Being a good listener is also appreciated, says Dr. Lisa Ferrari, a registered psychologist and director of the Vancouver Psychology Centre. "Your friend needs acceptance, and a non-judgemental sounding board," she says. "It's important to let your friend vent. Venting is the process in which they can make sense of the situation."

What not to say

"Don't say 'you're young; you'll marry again', 'there's plenty of fish in the sea,' or 'he wasn't good for you'—they play into that myth of replacing loss," says Hoogenberg.

It's also smart to avoid criticizing the soon-to-be ex, or choosing sides. Friendships can turn ugly when someone supports 'Team Sarah' or 'Team Andrew.' "It's important to stay neutral, to validate your friend's feelings, and not to question or challenge those feelings," says Dr. Ferrari.

Job loss

Often a person's sense of self is tied to their profession, and when they are laid off it can make them feel worthless and lost.

What to say

Dr. Ferrari recommends making your conversation open-ended to encourage your friend to vent. Then, try to move the conversation toward recognizing past job triumphs. "Ask them about a time in their job when they felt that they had a particular success, when they received really good feedback," she says. "If you draw out what they did well and felt good about, you

can help them shift their perspective.” This can help your friend move from sad and unconfident to proactive and empowered. “Their new reality is that they need to be looking ahead at other opportunities,” she says. Gaining a resilient outlook and being able to bounce back can help them heal from this experience.

What not to say

“Don’t come with statements of what you think they’re feeling,” she says. Saying things like ‘you hated that job anyway’ won’t make your friend feel better. Dr. Ferrari says that such assumptions are “a sure way of shutting your friend down. Instead, your questions should be curious to increase the likelihood that they’ll feel supported and heard.”