

*Tips for Communicating:
With Those Who Have Lost A Loved One
by Edie Hartshorne*

You struggle not knowing what to say to friends and family after they have lost someone dear.

The loss of a friend or family member's child is a powerful opportunity to come to peace with any awkwardness you may feel about death. Dying is an inevitable part of life. However while the passing of a parent or peer may seem a natural inevitability—no matter how painful--the loss of a child can feel somehow completely out of alignment with the life cycle. This increases the discomfort for most of us. We expect that parents die before their children; few of us are prepared to face the death of children.

Embrace this tragic circumstance as an opportunity for you to open your heart and grow. The uneasy truth is that for most of us, providing solace to others will become a lifetime skill, one that we will be using more and more as the years go by and death becomes a greater inevitability in our lives.

Here are a few “tips” for kind communications with those your care about: A few “do’s” that will make a difference, as well as words of wisdom.

(1) Be present to exactly where your friend is in the moment.

If your friend bursts into tears six months after the child's death, take a deep breath to bring yourself fully into the moment, speak slowly and lovingly, “Of course you feel like crying.” Be sure to validate the person's grief with assurances such as, “It has only been six months. I so appreciate your willingness to share with me how you feel. I can imagine how hard it must be for you.” Do not offer advice. Listening fully and with a big heart is the most powerful medicine. Honor where your friend or family member is at that moment with words that validate the pain.

(2) Actively offer concrete ways you can help instead of waiting for the person to ask.

You may feel shy about what to bring to or do for the mourning friend or family member. You may worry you might cook the wrong food, or seem invasive if you clean the refrigerator. However, in most cases, whatever you do will be appreciated as the bereaved will be in such a state of overwhelm. Additionally, you might offer suggestions that you know will make the person happy: “Would you have time to take a break this weekend, so we can take a short hike together? The cherry blossoms are blooming. They are just beautiful!” Suggest practical and small activities-- maybe just walking around the block. Offer opportunities for a short respite from grieving by changing the focus a bit. Most of us find solace in simple things: a sunset, a blooming magnolia, or a cafe latte in a cozy café. If your friend says, “no,” do not take it personally. Keep offering.

(3) Do make phone calls to your friend or family member on anniversaries during that first year.

Acknowledging anniversaries and birthdays of the person who died can sometimes feel awkward and you may hesitate to bring them up. However, the bereaved is fully aware of these dates and having them unacknowledged can feel very lonely. A simple acknowledgment goes a long way: "I know today is Susie's birthday. How are you doing?" If you feel very shy about broaching the subject in person, you can always send an email or leave a message by voicemail on the important anniversary. It is likely you will touch the person's heart in a very deep way by remembering. Anniversaries are difficult, and it's rare that they are recalled by others; the grieving parent must often face them alone.

(4) Do reminisce with your friend or family member about the person who has died.

You bump into your friend in the supermarket and the school year has just begun. You think back to years ago when both of your children started Kindergarten together. You hesitate at first to say anything, afraid you will bring up uncomfortable memories. Don't hold back. Speak your heart. There is a good chance your friend is keenly aware that school has begun, and many recollections do arise for them. You might say, "Well, it's September again. Can you believe it was fifteen years ago when Johnny took Susie's hand on that first day of Kindergarten! They were so precious!" Many people are afraid they are being disrespectful to reminisce, but in truth, the bereaved often appreciate the chance to relive the good moments and to feel the sense of community that comes with recalling shared memories.

(5) Do listen when your friend wants to tell stories or grieve.

This is a great opportunity for you to become aware of your own comfort level with death and dying. As all of us grow older and will be faced with loss in many forms. Handling our discomfort and pain connected to loss becomes a lifelong learning, and it's important that each of us are patient with ourselves--and each other--as we find our way in expressing our compassion and concern. Do listen, of course, when your friend needs to tell stories or to cry. The biggest gift you have is your patient attentiveness. And the grieving person's gift to you is to teach you more about your own responses to death and dying.

(6) Do let your friend know that you feel privileged to help in anyway.

If you call to say, "I would love to shop for you." And your friend says, "I just cannot ask you to do that for me again," remind her that doing so is no burden. You might point out all the times they did small things to help you out or let them know that it means a lot to you to be of support. You might suggest arranging a regular schedule to shop or help her with other chores, so they do not feel they have to continually ask for help. You might suggest: "How about I shop for you every Tuesday? I will be by at noon; have a list for me."

...and some don'ts...

(1) Do not give advice.

Many times when we feel uncomfortable with another person's loss, we offer advice hoping to make everything better. However, most times the bereaved merely wants to be heard and acknowledged for the loss. Advice such as, "I have a great acupuncturist. I think that is just what you need to feel better!" is not helpful. Instead, be fully present and available to listen, offering your most heartfelt sentiments.

(2) Do not say you know just how the grieving person feels.

Do not compare your losses to that of the grieving person. “I know just how it is; I lost my mom last year.” To compare our loss to the loss of our friend and family member takes away our loving focus and sometimes can seem to trivialize the other person’s pain. This can be particularly true when a parent has lost a child. There is something particularly lonely about losing a child. If you have not suffered a similar loss, it’s better to make no comparisons.

(3) Do not remain silent.

It is common to be afraid of saying the “wrong thing,” so then many of us say nothing at all. However, imagine how isolating it is for the grieving parent to be surrounded by friends and family who remain silent. It’s so important to validate the other person’s reality, and share your truth plainly. “I just heard your terrible news. I am so sorry and sad. I just want you to know I am holding you in my heart...and I am just stunned to hear the news.”

(4) Do not wait for your friend or family member to bring up the subject.

It’s always hard to reach out and especially hard when we are grieving. Many people are afraid they will burden others with their pain, so they say nothing although they long to share their thoughts and feelings. And so many of us become overwhelmed by the tragedy of someone else losing a child, so instead of reaching out, we become immobilized by fear. Put words to your overwhelm. “It is so overwhelming to me that you lost Alice. I barely know what to say, but my heart feels so deeply for you, and I want to let you know how much I care.”

(5) Do not try to fix your friend or family member.

Stay present to the other person’s pain. Notice if in your own discomfort, you try to fix something to try to get rid of the hurt or to “soften” the reality. There is nothing to fix. It is natural for someone to feel grief when having lost a loved one, and it’s very painful, especially, after the death of a child. An important part of the healing process is being able to sit with the pain. Your biggest gift is to just be there with your love. There is nothing to “repair.”

(6) Do not ask, “Is there anything I can do?”

Just do it. When people grieve, they are often so overwhelmed that they do not even know where to begin to ask for help or may simply feel embarrassed and shy about reaching out. Take the initiative. “I was just in your neighborhood and thought you might like supper. Bring over a casserole and a bouquet of daisies. Take a peek in the refrigerator to see what you can pick up at the store for your friend or family member. Check the toothpaste, dish soap, and take the initiative to handle the little things. You can make a huge difference in the smallest of ways.

edie@hartshorne.net

book websites:

edie.hartshorne.net

lightinblueshadows.com

(510)526-4476

Copyright 2010 by Edie Hartshorne. All rights reserved.