

WHAT NOT TO SAY (as reported by teens who have experienced grief)

“You have lots of other good friends.”

This suggests that the friend who died can be replaced by others. His/her unique personality and relationship to the griever can never be replaced by another person.

“Thank God you have another sister/brother”

This suggests that another member of the family will replace the one who died.

“God wanted him/her”

Some people do not share this spiritual belief, or that God “chose” their loved one. Issues around faith are highly challenged by many grievers anyway and this statement can complicate that search for meaning. For some, this belief can be their source of strength but allow them to tell you if this is the case.

“He/She’s in a better place.”

Not all people believe there is a “better place”. Most feel that the “best place for my loved one was here”.

“He/She would not want to see you so sad.”

This creates guilt feelings that complicate mourning.

“Don’t grieve around (other people); it will upset them.”

It’s really important for grievers to talk about their loss, rather than to feel it in isolation from others.

“I know how you feel...my (relative/friend) just passed away.”

Every loss is unique; they cannot be compared. Comparison is insulting.

“Are you feeling better?”

There may never be a time when the griever feels “better”. They may just feel different. This doesn’t mean they can never enjoy life again, but they will never lose that part of them which came from their loved one. The scar is always present.

WHAT TO SAY

“I don’t know what to say.”

An honest, straightforward response that acknowledges the loss. When people don’t mention the loss, it can feel like the loved one never existed.

“You must miss (name)” OR “I was thinking about (name) today.”

Use the person’s name as often as you would if they were alive. They still live in the hearts of their grievers.

“How is today going?”

This is a great alternative to “how are you?”. In the early stages, you can be sure that the griever is not “fine” even though he/she may say that out of habit.

“Do you have a picture of (name)?” OR “What was (name) like?”

Grievers want to know that their loved one’s life had meaning. When you ask about him/her, it reinforces the fact that they played an important role in the griever’s life.

“How is (the rest of) your family?” OR “How are your other friends?”

This respects that the griever’s sadness may be extended into his/her family, creating a more difficult situation within the home or that the griever’s peer support system is affected too, which can feel quite isolating.

Suggestions for Journaling or Open-Ended Writing

1. What are you feeling? Make a list of things that come to your mind.
 I am sad...that you aren't with me
 I am afraid...that I'll never love again
 I am angry...that I don't have you and now I'm alone
2. What do you miss most about the person in your thoughts?
 I miss...sharing your hugs
 I miss...hanging out together
 I miss...talking on the phone with you
3. What do you wish you'd said or hadn't said? What regrets do you have?
 I regret...that I didn't lend you the sweater you wanted to borrow
 I regret...that I told you to leave me alone that day
 I regret...that I was angry with you the last time we were together
 I regret...not telling you ^{how} ~~how~~ much I care for you
 I wish...I didn't yell at you when you didn't agree with me
 I wish...I didn't resent your sickness and sometimes wasn't as patient as I should've been
 I wish...I hadn't hurt your feelings
 I wish...I'd have listened to your advice
4. What are the things your loved one did that made you thankful they were part of your life?
 I'm grateful...that I learned love through you
 I really appreciate...that we would take walks together
 I really liked...sharing secrets with you
 I really liked...how you made me laugh
 I really admired...how hard you worked
5. What piece of knowledge or wisdom did your loved one give to you? How has it impacted your life? How do you intend to use it in the future?
 You always said...to look on the bright side. I didn't always do that and it's really hard to do it now. I'm really going to try to do that now
 It doesn't matter...now that I didn't get my way when we argued. It seems so unimportant now
 I know how important it is now to...
6. What was his/her most meaningful activity or object? How will you be connected to it?
 I didn't like your kind of music...but I bought a CD that you had and I listen to it to remind me of you
 I'm reading...some of your favourite books and it makes me feel closer to you
 You wanted me to spend more time...with the family and I'm doing that now because...
 I keep your favourite _____ with me now and it helps me feel like you're still around

Adapted from Don't Let Death Ruin Your Life by Jill Brooke

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Deciding if a Counselor Is Right for You

Trust your instincts. You may leave your first counseling session feeling you have "clicked" with your counselor. On the other hand, it may well take you several sessions to form an opinion.

In addition to your gut feeling, the following inventory may help you determine whether or not the counselor you have chosen is meeting your needs. You should meet with your counselor a few times before using this test.

- 0=never
- 1=slightly or occasionally
- 2=moderately or sometimes
- 3=a great deal or most of the time
- 4=markedly or all of the time

In the blank next to each question, write the number that most applies.

1. _____ *I feel that this counselor understands me.* Empathetic understanding is the basis for the work you will do in a counseling relationship. Does the counselor convey a desire to understand you? Does he listen closely to your thoughts and feelings? If your counselor isn't empathetic, you probably won't feel understood and you will probably not trust this person to help you heal. Be aware, though, that understanding is not the same as total agreement. Sometimes a counselor may understand, but still disagree.
2. _____ *I have a clear understanding of how this counselor will help me with my grief.* A good counselor can help you understand how the counseling process can help you heal, so ask. Express your own counseling goals and see if the counselor agrees that your expectations are realistic. Keep in mind that it may take several sessions to develop mutually agreeable counseling goals.
3. _____ *The counselor seems genuinely interested and attends to what I say.* In other words, do you feel connected to the

counselor? Is she alert, sensitive, and caring? Or does the counselor seem tired, distracted, or overworked? You deserve and need your counselor's full attention. If you aren't getting focused, genuine attention, look for help elsewhere.

4. _____ *What the counselor says about my grief makes sense to me.* Trust your instincts. Unfortunately, some people become victims of misinformed counselors who lack training in bereavement therapy. If the counselor makes comments that reflect judgment instead of understanding, you may want to consider another counseling resource. "You shouldn't feel that way," "Have you thought about what you have to be thankful for?" and "You just have to accept it and get on with life" are inappropriate, judgmental comments.

5. _____ *This counselor encourages me to "teach" him or her about my grief experience.* You are the expert about your own grief. For the counselor to understand your experience, he must allow you to teach him about your grief journey. One clue? If the counselor is talking more than you are, odds are that he is doing the teaching, not you.

6. _____ *My counselor helps me explore areas I might want to avoid.* A helpful counselor will encourage you to talk, think about, and feel certain feelings—sometimes uncomfortable feelings—you may want to avoid. Effective counselors use a skill called "supportive confrontation" to help you participate in the hard work of mourning.

7. _____ *This counselor seems flexible and open to perspectives other than her own.* Openness to different thoughts and ideas is the mark of a good professional. If your counselor is as an "all-knowing expert" who espouses the only "correct" answers, you would probably be better helped by someone more flexible and open.

8. _____ *My counselor is willing to help me explore other sources of support.* While support groups aren't for everyone, many grieving people find them to be a tremendous help. Your counselor should be willing to help you find additional

healing resources. Ask if he is aware of any groups or books that have helped other clients.

9. _____ *Valuable conversation, not small talk, fills our sessions.* While most counseling sessions begin with some "warm-up" and social exchanges, counseling is not chit-chat. If you end up talking about everything but your grief, something is wrong. Either you, the counselor, or both of you are afraid of encountering the feelings of hurt and loss. A helpful counselor will move from warm-up time to focusing on your healing. If you feel like you have a pleasant social experience with your counselor, but aren't making progress in your grief work, discuss this with her.

10. _____ *This counselor is willing to share his own experiences with death when they seem appropriate.* Distant, unexpressive counselors who never talk about their own life experiences do exist, but effective counseling requires a meaningful interchange. Your counselor should openly respond to your questions about his own experiences with death and grief. While the primary focus should remain your grief, it is certainly appropriate to ask if your counselor has experienced the death of someone loved. This doesn't mean that a counselor must have had numerous death experiences to be helpful to you, just that he should be willing to draw from whatever experiences he has had in answering your questions.

11. _____ *My counselor is interested in talking to people important to me—family, relatives, friends—when it seems it would help the counseling process.* An effective counselor will be interested in how you interact with people around you. If you or your counselor decide to exclude these significant influences, counseling may not be as helpful as it could be.

12. _____ *This counselor seems to practice what she preaches.* The helpful bereavement counselor is one who will allow herself to mourn when a death occurs. She mourns in the same healthy ways she recommends for you. Ask your counselor what she has found helpful.

13. _____ *My counselor understands that the concepts of "reconciliation," "accommodation," or "integration" are more helpful than "resolution" or "recovery."* A good counselor knows that you are forever changed by the death of someone loved. If the counselor's goal is to help you "get over" or "resolve" your grief, he probably isn't the right counselor for you. Your mutual goal should be to learn to live with your grief while at the same time finding continued meaning in living.

14. _____ *This counselor treats me as an equal and relates to me in a positive way.* If you feel comfortable with your counselor, you probably feel that way because he treats you with respect. If, on the other hand, your counselor has an air of superiority and formality, consider finding someone else.

15. _____ *My counselor gives me a sense of hope for healing.* Hope for healing is essential to your ultimate reconciliation of the death. No, you won't ever "get over it," but your counselor should help you feel like you're progressing in your work of mourning.

Understanding Your Score

Add up your score and check the total here:

- 45-60 This counselor is probably a good choice for you.
30-45 Consider finding a more compatible counselor.
0-30 This counselor probably can't help you. Look for another.

Though this is not a scientific inventory, it may provide you with a sense of whether or not you are working with a counselor who is helpful to you.

EXPRESS YOURSELF: Go to *The Understanding Your Grief Journal* on p. 124.