Talking to the recently bereaved

Most of us spend more time at the office than at home. Business discussions are often interspersed with conversations about the kids, sports, and personal matters. We become close to many of our co-workers. When one of them dies or suffers the loss of a member of their immediate family, it's not unusual to feel awkward and unsure about what to say or do.



You may choose to attend the funeral or memorial service of your co-worker or send a card of remembrance to the family. But what do you say to the family? It's always better to say something rather than nothing at all, no matter how difficult it may be. The bereaved family members will sense your sincerity and value your support even if the words come with some difficulty.

Avoiding all conversation with the family may actually add to their pain. Try to overcome your own feelings of uncertainty and awkwardness, and reach out to the bereaved family members. Here are some tips to help you give the support needed, while coming to terms with the death yourself:

How to start?

It can be difficult to know where to begin when you want to express your concern and appreciation to the bereaved in an appropriate manner, but there are several ways that are tactful and appropriate. Here are a few:

- Introduce yourself to the family members and indicate your connection to the deceased or bereaved person.
- Express your condolences verbally.
- Write a note or card.
- Make a tangible gesture of support. Cook a meal, offer a hug, deliver a book on grieving or ask if there is anything you can do to help out in the bereaved household.

Phrases to avoid

Although any heartfelt expression of grief or support is generally taken in the spirit in which it was intended, there are a few things that should be avoided:

- "I know just how you feel." Each person and each person's loss is unique. No one really knows how the bereaved person is feeling.
- "It was God's will," "God never gives us more than we can bear," or "At least he/she isn't suffering." Phrases like these, while well intentioned, can conflict with the beliefs of the grieving, and are small comfort in the wake of a major loss.
- "At least you have another child" or "You are still young enough to have another child." No life is ever replaceable with another.
- "You're not over it yet? It's been six weeks, two months, etc." Or "you'll get over it soon." This will always sound insensitive. Everyone grieves at their own pace and in their own way. Many will feel the absence for the rest of their own lives.

Reflect on your life

Dealing with grief can be complicated. Your own feelings surrounding a death can help you deal with those of the bereaved around you. You may find yourself thinking about your own mortality or feeling anxious and vulnerable. Don’t be afraid to look inward and feel sadness.

You may initially even feel angry with the person who died or with the circumstances surrounding his or her death. Anger is normal and is not necessarily harmful at this stage. Acknowledging anger and being honest about it can help the grieving process.

In the coming weeks or months your thoughts may often drift toward the person who died. Memories can be very vivid. You may even think you see him or her at the water cooler or hear their voice in the hall. This is completely natural. You may also feel tearful or need to cry. Don’t be afraid to express yourself to the others who loved and will miss the deceased.

Don’t be afraid to reach out unobtrusively when you sense others are open to it. Feelings shared with honesty can help immensely during the grieving process. Both your own and that of the deceased’s family.