

When Silence Really Is Golden

“The most basic and powerful way to connect to another person is to listen. Just listen. Perhaps the most important thing we ever give each other is our attention. . . .

A loving silence often has far more power to heal and to connect than the most well-intentioned words.”

—DR. RACHEL NAOMI REMEN

I realize that most people are extremely uncomfortable around a bereaved person. I know in my discomfort I have been known to ramble, nervously saying an inappropriate thing or two. I liken being present during this difficult time, to standing in a fire from which there is no escape. Some friends and family avoid the fire, others stand near the fire, and others jump into the fire with you. All of those postures are understandable considering how uncomfortable we as a society are with physical death. Most of us want to be compassionate however close we can get to the fire.

Having been on the receiving end of many attempts at solace, please indulge me. It feels good to get these down. Here are a few things not to say and some things that worked for comforting me during an impossible time.

Things not to say:

1. “You have to be strong.” One mother hugged me and said these words in my ear. I wanted to knock her down and ask if that was strong

enough. How strong is enough? The pain is so intense that to be told I must be anything is incomprehensible.

2. “What can I do for you?” Unfortunately, this question was most disturbing to me. I wanted my son back in front of me so I could touch him. I would ask if they could do that for me. Of course, no one could so we both stood there feeling helpless. I have no idea what to do about anything at this time and certainly can’t verbalize with any clarity what I may need.
3. “I know how you feel.” At this moment, it is difficult for the grieving person to hear that statement with appreciation. The pain is so intense it is incomprehensible that it can be shared.
4. “At least you have other children.” If the loss is a child and there are remaining children please do not say these words. While I am grateful for those children, along with them, I must continue to live in a physical world without the one that’s gone.

Words and gestures that may be helpful:

1. “I have such fond memories of your loved one.” The most helpful thing for me was when people said, “I have such fond memories of Phillip. I will miss his smile.” Any story shared by someone who knew him and remembered an event or special time was the most helpful. Generally, these things made me aware that he made a difference while he was here. It was important for me to know that his life mattered which somehow gave me a small sense of comfort.
2. “Your family is in my prayers.” If the bereaved is a spiritual person, telling them that you will pray is helpful and soothing to hear.
3. Try not to make it about your story. One obviously annoyed woman called a few days after the funeral to let me know that she stood in line quite some time. She then asked, “Where were you when I got to the front of the line to see you?” Her self-righteous tone rendered her unable to consider what it took for me to stand in front of my son’s

casket. Please do not require an explanation. Just know it has nothing to do with you.

4. “I will deliver food within the next few weeks.” You might choose to say something definitive that contributes to the well being of the family without creating one more thing to decide. Although eating is not a priority, there will be a need for food for weeks after everyone has returned to their lives.
5. “Please know that we care.”
6. Send an email or written note.
7. Consider making the requested memorable charitable donation.

If you have spoken some less than appropriate words to a grieving person, please know that you are forgiven. Even the woman who suggested I was inappropriate by not being by Phillip’s casket has been forgiven. It doesn’t mean I plan to have lunch with her though.

Sharing my thoughts and feelings about this difficult issue may help you make better choices when expressing compassion to a bereaved person. If you do not know what to say, say nothing. Lovingly listen, hold a hand, or give a silent hug. The song says, “You say it best, when you say nothing at all.”

