



Boundaries for Grieving People: What You Don't Have to Do.

Grief changes everything.

When you've lost someone you love, especially a spouse, partner, parent, child, sibling, or close friend, you're not only carrying the pain of the loss itself. You're also navigating other people's reactions to your grief.

Some people don't know what to say. Some say things that feel hurtful, even when they mean well. Some offer advice you didn't ask for. Others assume they know what you need and make plans on your behalf. You may find yourself feeling exhausted by the pressure to respond, explain, reassure, or make other people comfortable. **If that's where you are, this handout is for you.**

The boundaries and permission slips in these pages are reminders that you're allowed to take care of yourself while you grieve. You don't owe anyone an explanation for what you need. You don't have to manage other people's feelings about your loss. And you don't have to recover on anyone else's timeline.

May these reminders help you honor your needs, protect your energy, and give yourself the same compassion you would offer to someone you love.

Boundaries that grieving people may need

Visiting boundaries

"Thank you for thinking of me. I'm not up for visitors right now."

"Please check with me before making plans to come by."

"I know you're trying to help, but I need more quiet and solitude than I used to."

Communication boundaries

"I may not respond right away."

"I appreciate your message. I don't have the energy to continue the conversation."

"I'm not available for phone calls, but texts are easier for me right now."

Advice boundaries

"I'm not looking for suggestions right now. I just need people to listen."

"Everyone grieves differently. I'm finding my own way through this."

Emotional boundaries

"I don't need you to fix this."

"I don't need a silver lining."

"I just need you to sit with me in what's true."

Permission slips for grieving people

You do not have to answer every text, email, card, or message.

You do not have to explain why you're not ready.

You do not have to host visitors because they want to help.

You do not have to accept help that isn't actually helpful.

You do not have to comfort people who are uncomfortable with your grief.

You do not have to make other people feel better about your loss.

You do not have to be grateful for every suggestion, gift, or piece of advice.

You do not have to update everyone on how you're doing.

You do not have to pretend you're having a better day than you are.

You do not have to recover on anyone else's timeline.

Things grieving people often need to hear

You are not a burden.

You are not grieving wrong.

You are not behind.

You are not making people uncomfortable by being honest.

You are not responsible for managing everyone else's feelings about your loss.

According to Grief Coach Shelby Forsythia, the three most helpful phrases you can say to a grieving person are:

"Of course..."

"I'm here..."

"Right now..."

[Watch this interview with Shelby](#) to hear why those phrases are helpful and how they can be used over and over again, in a variety of circumstance.

When my brother Pat died at age 35 in 2006, this poem helped enormously in my healing process.

Grief

Grief feels like a cave, an aimless groping
into a black deepening void.
Into your hand I press the only candle
I have, a message to flicker
into the darkness of your soul.
Grief feels like a cave, but it is not a cave.
Grief is a tunnel, a journey.
The blackness is the same.
The only difference is HOPE!

—Marilyn Gryte

I remember telling my mom, “I think I’m going to become a grief activist.” I don’t even know what that means, but I realized we do such a terrible job at grief in our society that I wanted to do something about that. So I collected resources and share them with people when I can. The list of rights and the Do’s and Don’ts that follow were also very helpful and healing for me.

Your Rights as a Person in Grief

- You have a right to remain silent.
- You have a right to cry, any time and anywhere.
- You have a right to express your grief in ways that seem appropriate to you.
- You have a right to talk about your dead spouse/child/sibling/parent/friend as often as you would wish and on whatever occasions you wish to do so.
- You have a right to negotiate for time out from the usual schedules and obligations, so that you may honor your grief — and heal.
- You have a right to complete your grieving in your own time and in your own way, without being subject to the ‘schedules’ and expectations of others.
- You have a right to assert the centrality of the experience of grieving, within your own life and as it affects the lives of others.

Source: Grieving: A Beginner’s Guide by Jerusha Hull McCormack, 2006

Do's and Don'ts for Offering Condolences to Those Who Are Grieving

People usually say things in an effort to comfort those who are grieving, but often what's said is more harmful than helpful. No wonder people don't know what to say when someone dies! Nobody tells us. Below are some suggestions for what to do and what not to do to console those who are grieving from the book *Surviving the Death of a Sibling* by T.J. Wray.

DON'Ts

- Don't try to comfort with your remarks by saying things like "he's in a better place" or "there is a reason for everything" because no matter what the grieving person's beliefs, that's not helpful in reducing their sorrow.
- Don't try to come up with theological reasons for an untimely death, it's not comforting.
- Don't say things like, "cheer up, she wouldn't have wanted you to suffer." (If you shouldn't feel sad when someone dies, then when SHOULD you feel sad?). This will not take away your sorrow.
- Don't try to ignore the person's grief, say something like "If you want to talk about your brother, I'd like to hear about him."
- Don't say, "life goes on" because it doesn't for the deceased.
- Don't expect people to "get over it" or "come to closure," they will likely never get over the loss, though their grief will become less acute over time.
- Don't place a time table on the grief process. Your expectation that someone should be done grieving by a certain time only exacerbates their grief because they feel the additional social pressure to get over something that has fundamentally changed their existence.
- Don't say, "what can I do to help?" or "Let me know what I can do to help." Everybody says this, and many probably do want to help, but a grieving person will almost NEVER call you to ask for help. It's not that they don't want you around or don't need your help. They don't have the energy – to identify what they need, or to pick up the phone and ask for help.
- Don't ask for details of the person's death, however tempting it might be. If the grieving person wants to share the information, they will. Besides, wanting to know how they died is more about your own curiosity than about the consoling the grieving person.
- Don't pretend it didn't happen! When the grieving person returns to work or school, say, "I'm glad you're back. I'll be checking in on you from time to time. Let me know if I become bothersome." Then actually check in on that person for the next few months. It will be a lot easier for a grieving person to say, "stop checking on me" than to reach out and ask for help by saying, "will you check on me from time to time?"

DON'TS Continued

- Don't try to comfort with your remarks by saying things like "he's in a better place" or "there is a reason for everything" because no matter what the grieving person's beliefs, that's not
- Don't try to top the grieving person's story with a death you experienced.
- Don't make "dismissive condolences" such as, "Oh, I'm so sorry your brother died. How are your parents?" This is especially painful to hear from someone who doesn't even know your parents.
- Don't tell the grieving person that they should get a hobby (etc.) to keep their mind occupied because that sort of advice is just not helpful.

DO'S

- Do say what you feel: "This is terrible, you must be heartbroken."
- Do be honest and sincere, "I wish I knew what to say to comfort you, but I just don't."
- Do be there with the grieving person. Sometimes just someone else's physical presence is plenty so they don't feel so alone.
- Do send a personalized note. Send another one a few weeks later, and others following that.
- Do visit the person who is grieving. Bring food, a gift, make tea, clean the kitchen, listen
- Do ask if they want to go out for a walk or to eat or to the movies.
- Do visit again. But be understanding if they're not up for a visit.
- Do invite the grieving person over for breakfast, lunch or dinner.
- Do hug the grieving person. Human touch can be very healing.
- Do ask the person to talk about their feelings.
- Do ask the person to talk about the deceased.
- Do invite them to social gatherings.
- Do offer to do things for the grieving person, but understand that what aids and comforts one person may be offensive and annoying to others.
- Do be gentle with the grieving person.
- Do offer to do mundane chores and tasks for the grieving person (pick up dry cleaning, wash the floor, etc.).