

Good Grief! Part II

Written by Katherine Tandy Brown

Tuesday, 05 February 2019 15:39 - Last Updated Wednesday, 06 February 2019 06:48



A note to readers: Since this particular column is a second half of the [previously-published one](#), my co-columnist, Chris “Sutty” Suddeth and I decided to break our every-other-issue writing pattern and publish this one back-to-back with its predecessor. Sutty will offer his wisdom on another topic in the following two issues of *Lowcountry Weekly*. Fair enough!

After finishing my last Wholly Holistics column about grief, I realized there’s a lot more to say about it. Entire books have been written. But don’t worry, that’s not my goal. No official letters follow my name that proclaim me to be a psychologist. My own experience – and the experiences of others who’ve shared their stories – are my major resources. Once again, one of my go-to professionals is grieving and loss expert David Kessler, author with Elisabeth Kubler-Ross of *On Grief and Grieving*, among other valuable books.

One issue I’d like to address is how a relative/friend/acquaintance of someone who’s suffered a loss and is grieving can offer support. Often, we don’t know what to say and are afraid of saying the wrong thing. What if we do that, and the griever breaks down right there? What then? What if we can’t think of anything to say? Even more important, what are some of the wrong things to say?

Years ago, a dear friend who’d been a nurse was visiting her hospital-bound father. His pneumonia had been responding well to treatment and his prognosis was good. So she took a break to go home overnight. When she returned next day, he’d taken a noticeably sharp turn for the worse. Turned out that a night nurse had inadvertently given him the wrong medication, one he was allergic to, and he passed away that afternoon. Knowing of the error, my friend was furious and grieved deeply, as he’d been in his early 70s and generally in great health. The Saturday funeral was especially tragic, of course, for his friends and relatives.

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The following Monday, while buying groceries, my friend ran into an acquaintance whom she knew only socially. Approaching with a bright smile as if they were clinking glasses at a cocktail party, the woman said, “So...how was Saturday?” As if it were a don’t-miss social event. My friend never spoke to her again.

Hopefully, most people would not be that crass. But equally as uncaring are questions and comments such as, “Shouldn’t you be getting over that by now?” “Snap out of it” and “You’re just having a pity party.”

As I mentioned in the last *Lowcountry Weekly*, grief is as singular, as personal, as each one of us. Sometimes, for many reasons, we may initially resist grief. Perhaps we’re not ready to face its heart-heavy burdens yet. There’s no way to know how a griever is progressing through the process – unless, of course, he or she tells you. And you’ve no clue whether or not one of the above *faux-pas* may cause a griever’s mind to turn inward, toward guilt and blaming themselves.

Novelist and non-fiction writer Anne Lamott, author of the classic writers’ tome, *Bird by Bird*, proffers the following wisdom about an unsure mind at a tender time: “My mind is like a bad neighborhood. I try not to go into it too often.”

Kessler suggests that a grieving person stay in the present as much as possible and “embrace memories that comfort, not cause pain.” Life, he says, is made up of hills and valleys, mountaintops and canyons. We have to journey through “the dark night” and deal with our sadness. Along the sojourn through grief, he assures, a light can gradually emerge for many people and with it, can come the knowledge that “When a loved one dies, you can still love them spiritually.” As with every stage of the grief process, reaching this awareness – if someone is going to – is an individual choice reached in an individual’s own time.

And as a helpful friend or relative, you can just be there for them as they reach their own awarenesses at their own speed.

Former United Methodist pastor Larry Patton – now a Bereavement Specialist for Hinds Hospice in Fresno, California – writes an informative blog called “Hospice Matters.” In a recent post he speaks of the “evil twins” that stalk folks in hospice care: fear and ignorance, i.e. not

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knowing exactly how to act to help the patient and stumbling through the process. I believe the same duo also prey upon those who are grieving, sometimes in the form of well-meaning supporters.

That said, how can their intentions be reversed to offer compassion and peace instead? What can we say or do?

The site www.grief.org has the following suggestions, some of which I'm sure you already know:

1. 1. I am so sorry for your loss.
2. I wish I had the right words, just know I care.
3. I don't know how you feel, but I am here to help in any way I can.
4. You and your loved one will be in my thoughts and prayers.
5. My favorite memory of your loved one is....
6. I am always just a phone call away.
7. Give a hug instead of saying something.
8. We all need help at times like this I am here for you.
9. I am usually up early or late, if you need anything.
10. Say nothing, just be with the person.

To the above, I'll add expressing care and concern by sending a sympathy card or a hand-written note. Don't write an epistle. Just offer your heartfelt feelings and perhaps a fond memory of the deceased. You might want to send a donation in their loved one's name to a favorite cause. Feel free to volunteer to bring a meal or two or even round up friends to set up a "meal-train" for a week or so; to do a chore, such as cleaning the kitchen or the bathroom; or to make a grocery/errand run. Continue to keep in touch with them for a while, after the initial "rush" of well-wishers thins out.

Whatever you do, allow the grief-stricken the time they need to be with their grief. You – and they –will be glad you did.

Resources for further reading include www.davidkessler.org, www.hospice-matters.com, www.grief.com, and <https://www.vitas.com/resources/grief-and-bereavement/feelings-and-reac>

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[tions-to-a-significant-loss.](#)

The latter site addresses the myriad feelings and behaviors of grieving and offers suggestions for relief.