

## What Do I Say?

By Jan Rybeck

Since September 11<sup>th</sup>, I have been afraid to call friends and colleagues. I am afraid that I will hear that yet another person I know has suffered a terrible, unthinkable loss...and worse, I will have to face, once again, my own inability to say anything that will make it all right.

The truth is, nothing will make it all right. You know that, I know that, but when we are keenly aware of another's pain, we want desperately to do something. What follows will guide you through the process of supporting your colleagues and friends who have suffered losses. This is not a comprehensive list as each situation is unique, requiring a special blend of insight, patience, compassion and action.

**Understand your motivation to help.** We humans have a drive to connect and be there for one another, this is the most obvious reason for wanting to help. Less clear but equally powerful is the need to avoid our own difficult feelings by focusing on those of others.

How can I be most helpful to this person?

What is driving my need to help?

How can I be there for this person and also deal with my own feelings?

**Personal connection and receptive listening are more powerful than the right words.** How often we hold back from others in need because we don't know what to say. Words can seem limp and superficial when directed at deep and significant loss. Don't worry. It's your presence and compassion that is most needed.

When sitting with your friend/colleague, take deep slow breaths and just be with them, listening and acknowledging what they feel.

Refrain from sharing your own grief experiences or from saying, "I know how you feel" as this can minimize your friend's experience.

Be patient with the other's need to repeat things. Replaying thoughts and feelings are part of the grief process that eventually allows the grieving to accept the loss. What would it take to be accepting of the others' process?

**Learn how you can help and what other resources might be available.** One of the cruel ironies of grief is that it inhibits one's ability to think clearly and function effectively at the very time when important decisions and logistics need to be put in place.

Be a sounding board for your friend/colleague, helping them sort through logistics and other issues around the loss.

What resources might they need?

What can you do specifically? Prepare a meal; make a donation in the deceased's name?

What can you do that requires asking first? Assist with shopping, childcare, cleaning, gathering resources are some possibilities.

What will your friend/colleague need later, after the initial support has gone away?

If you get the sense that grief is severely impairing your friend/colleague's functioning, offer more substantial help such as recommending the Employee Assistance Program or other mental health provider.

**Finding the right balance between being there for your grieving buddy and caring for yourself is key.** There are times when another's pain is too much for us to bear. Know your limits and find ways to gently and clearly direct your friend toward other resources if you cannot be there in the way they need.

How are you affected by the other's grief?

What supports do you have to help you cope?

Where can you direct your grieving friend/colleague to get more support?

Grief has no set timetable and no exact course. Few are able to go it on their own. Connection and assistance from others is what makes the process work.

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