

BEING THERE

What (& what not) to say and do in the aftermath of loss



The
DINNER PARTY

LIFE AFTER LOSS





What do you say and what do you do when someone you love loses someone they love?

All of us have had that awkward moment when, despite our best intentions, we're at a loss for what to say. We repeat the lines of a Hallmark card verbatim, only to find ourselves suddenly struck dumb. We tell ourselves people need space—an ill-disguised attempt to turn our own feelings of inadequacy into an act of gentle understanding. We worry we'll say the wrong thing, and so we say nothing at all.

Dinner Party friend Catherine Woodiwiss writes that surviving trauma requires both "firefighters" and "builders."* As days stretch into months and months stretch into years, we need the friends who are always up for a night in and who will continue to invite us for a night out, no matter how long it takes us to say yes.

We polled the men and women who've sat down at our tables to find out the best and worst things people said or did in the immediate aftermath of loss, and long after. The general conclusion? Being there is always better than the alternative.

**Woodiwiss, Catherine. "A New Normal: Ten Things I've Learned About Trauma." Sojourners. 13 January 2014.
<http://sojo.net/blogs/2014/01/13/new-normal-ten-things-ive-learned-about-trauma>*

Read on for a few tips that can help you avoid that deer-in-headlights look when next you find a friend in need.



1. Beware The Pity Face

After my mom passed away, I cherished people who treated me normally. This sounds like a simple thing, but, unfortunately, the default response to another's loss often seems to be a drop in facial expression coupled with, "Ohhhh..." My life was suddenly unrecognizable, and I needed to feel grounded in my sense of self. Having that pre-grief Katie reflected back to me from others was crucial.

- KATIE, CHAPEL HILL

When I've lost someone, I need space to go into crisis management. I need the people around me to give me tasks (arrange the funeral, write the obit, coordinate food deliveries, etc). I need to feel in charge of something that is so out of control. I need people to allow me to not cry, to take care of others. And then, slowly, a week later, maybe a month later, or maybe even during those days, I need someone to just hold me and let me be a mess and cry and be angry.

- LEORA, LOS ANGELES

There isn't a person among us who hasn't been on the receiving end of the pity face (and very likely, given it ourselves at some point). You know the one: There's an intake of breath, eyebrows scrunch down, and lips purse together, followed immediately by the same three words: "I'm so sorry." There's nothing wrong with that response in itself; indeed, we've seen it so many times at this point that we suspect we're somehow hard-wired for it.

Treating someone who's just undergone a major loss "normally" may seem counterintuitive. After all, it's better to acknowledge a friend's loss than to carry on as though nothing happened, right? Right. But losing someone we love is also deeply unmooring. We crave some semblance of control, and long to fix things, knowing full well that the real thing we want to fix is beyond our reach. We keep ourselves busy for fear of what we'll be left with when we're left alone. Despite the fact that everything feels different, we long for our old selves, and seek out reassurance that we haven't lost everything we had the day before.

Don't stay locked in the pity face. Offer to treat your friend to a movie, or to go on a hike: something that you two would have done in the past, but that doesn't necessarily require a lot of conversation. If your friend is rearranging furniture, or attempting to take charge when someone else could just as easily stand in, let them, and find out how you can help. Above all, respond to their cues.

"Life changes fast. Life changes in the instant. You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends," writes Joan Didion in *A Year of Magical Thinking*. We know that. We don't need the reminder.





2. Don't wait for someone to tell you how you can help: Offer something specific. Or just do it.

I can't imagine what you're going through, but I want to help. 'I'm going shopping tomorrow: do you need anything from the supermarket?' This kind of statement didn't try to negate or obscure the emotional reality of the moment, but was very focused on a specific question and offered a specific service. It also meant that the person - who was going anyway, regardless of whether I needed something or not - wouldn't be going out of their way. This was very meaningful to me, and enabled me to take an inventory of

things I needed but wouldn't necessarily have asked someone to find on my behalf.

- ESTHER, LOS ANGELES

Let me know if there's anything I can do.

I'm here for you. Don't hesitate to call if you need anything.

However well-intentioned, bland offerings of help rarely work. Few of us like asking for help, and in the immediate aftermath of a loss, we struggle to name what we need.

Instead, be as specific as possible with what you can offer, whether that's running out for toilet paper or groceries, babysitting or mowing the lawn, or ordering a food delivery service. Create a calendar and organize a group of friends to drop off meals, to avoid overstocking your friend's freezer with too many casseroles and baked goods.

And as days turn into weeks and weeks turn into months, dropping off a cake or sending flowers can be a great way to remind someone that you're thinking of them, long after the surge of attention has faded.





3. Don't tip-toe, don't compare, and don't whitewash. Do listen.

Months after my dad died, I was driving with my high school best friend in silence and suddenly she said, ‘So...your dad died. How are you feeling about that?’ After weeks of people tip-toeing around the subject and not meeting my eyesight, it was so incredibly refreshing to have someone confront this fact head on. I needed that acknowledgement that, yes, he was dead, not “lost” or “in a better place”. Dead. It gave me permission to speak frankly, to say exactly

how I was feeling, without needing to subvert my emotions or console the listener.

- HANNAH, NEW YORK

Everything happens for a reason. It could have been worse.

To quote the great LL Cool J, “Mama Said Knock You Out.”

Most of our common platitudes are born out of good intentions. We want somehow to lessen the blow, or to find a silver lining, or to fix the unfixable. We gloss over pain and seek reassurance that everything is okay, even if those reassurances are cloaked in silence and concealment.

You don't have to fill every silence. Rather than run away from the discomfort, try sitting with it, and don't be afraid to ask a question, even if you might be afraid to hear the answer. Just be sure to stick around to hear it.

Hang on, we're not done yet. Whitewashing applies to more than just our collective thirst for happy endings. Too often, mainstream notions of grief are seen in culturally “white” terms, failing to appreciate the multitude of practices we—of all cultural heritages, classes, and religions—have created around loss. Resist projecting your own experience on others, and remember that we are each our own best expert.

And don't forget: Grief is not just the product of losing someone you love. Make space for those of us whose losses are born of institutionalized violence, or collective or historical trauma. And when collective rage and historic grief erupt on the streets, or before your eyes, refuse to change the subject or avert your gaze. Above all: Don't shy away from the mess.





4. Tell me about...

I appreciate it when people can take it in stride and ask a bit about who the person was if they didn't know them.

- SHAINA, LOS ANGELES

I really appreciate when people share stories about my mom. So many people who knew her act like it's taboo to bring her name up. I want to hear things about her that I may never have known, and remember the stories I may have forgotten.

- ATTENDEE, FINDING WHAT FEEDS US

I really appreciate it when people ask about my dad's life and not just about his death.

- ATTENDEE, FINDING WHAT FEEDS US

Elizabeth Edwards once gave an interview* in which she talked about friends' reluctance to bring up her son, afraid that in so doing, they would remind her of one of the most painful chapters in her life. Au contraire, she said: she hadn't forgotten, and she loved knowing that others remembered that he'd lived.

Often, one of the best things we can do for each other is to make space to remember those who now live only in memory, by asking questions about those who've died.

Try things like: "Tell me about your mom..." Or "I wish I'd had the chance to meet your brother. What's one of your favorite stories about him?" Or "What would you ask your dad if he was around today?"

As always, don't try to force it, and follow your friend's lead. If now's not the time, respect that. But remember that not every memory is sad, and conversations about those we've lost don't have to be either.



*Netter, Sarah. "Elizabeth Edwards: In Her Own Words." ABC World News. 7 December 2010. <http://abcnews.go.com/US/elizabeth-edwards-words/story?id=12337723>



5. Stick around.

Not long after my dad passed away, I received a letter in the mail from my high school English teacher. She lost her mother when she was 19, and in the letter she said something that stuck with me and gave me strength as I came to terms with everything that had happened. ‘The pain never goes away,’ she said. ‘But it does lessen over time.’ It’s simultaneously comforting and disarming, a reminder that the wound will heal, but the scar will always remain. It keeps the experience very real while reminding that you’ve survived it.

- MARK, LOS ANGELES

Eight years after my mom passed, in the midst of exciting professional opportunities, the grief finally caught up with me and I decided to take a sabbatical. It was the toughest professional decision I’ve ever had to make in my life. What helped me most during that time was everyone’s unconditional understanding and support — especially from the people who I thought I’d be letting down by dropping out. No guilt, no doubts, no questions that made me second-guess my decision. When I was brave enough to tell the truth, people responded in kind.

|| - CHRISTINA, SAN FRANCISCO

If you’re sentient and above the legal voting age, chances are you’ve heard of the “Five Stages of Grief” at some point or another. Perhaps you’ve peddled them yourself, or with a nod of patient understanding, diagnosed a friend as still in “Denial”. While there’s a lot of truth to the model, those stages have been widely misinterpreted over the years. Creator Elisabeth Kübler-Ross never intended them to be linear, and indeed, developed the model after observing the dying, not those left behind.

The fact is, “grief,” “bereavement,” and “mourning” only tell part of the story.

While our experiences change over time, there’s no such thing as going back, or “moving on” or “getting over it” — at least not in the traditional sense. Two, six, and sixteen years out, we no longer identify as “grieving,” and resist what feels like an open declaration that something’s wrong. Yet we remain no less colored by the experience.

Significant loss — of a parent, a sibling, a partner, a friend — shapes who we are, and how we see the world, in ways both good and bad. It transforms the homes we go back to, if we have homes to go back to at all. It shapes our relationships with those we love—those we’ve known, and those we meet. We’re made simultaneously more resilient and more fragile.



Thank you to everyone who shared
their story for this piece, and during
our Spring 2014 event series,
Finding What Feeds Us, held in Los
Angeles, San Francisco, Washington,
DC, and New York City.

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THANK YOU

The Dinner Party is a community of mostly 20- and 30-somethings who've each experienced significant loss, and get together over dinner parties to talk about it and the ways in which it continues to affect our lives. Together, we're pioneering tools and community through which young people who've experienced significant loss can use their shared experience as a springboard toward living better, bolder, and more connected lives.

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