

I Don't Know What to Say: **Supporting Someone Who is Grieving**

By Marlene Lee, MA, Thanatology

*Grief is a tough topic that you might not want to read about it,
but please don't turn away and leave grief alone.*

HAVE YOU EVER THOUGHT:

“I don't know what to say” to someone who is grieving, or “I don't know what to do to help”?

Here, more than a dozen voices—ranging from childhood to nearly 70 years old—share heartfelt insight to help you support someone who has experienced the death of a loved one.

Some in the group are actively grieving a fresh loss of mere months, while some are reminiscing about a death that seared their soul decades ago. Virtual strangers to each other yet bonded by loss, they share their own words to “pay it forward.”

“What can you say? Tell me when you're thinking of my daughter, or ask me what I love and miss about her.” – Eric

“What can you do? My Mama died when I was 7. I participate in charity walks to raise awareness about cancer, and I absolutely love when family and friends join me and we walk together.” – Ginger

*“He died. And I just wanted to die, too. Friends literally pulled me outside for long walks and bike rides. I didn't want to admit it, but the fresh air and exercise helped my mind and my mood.” – M**

Loved ones who have died include mothers, fathers, brothers, and sisters. Best friends and soul mates. And children who were expected to outlive their parents.

“Sometimes people are afraid that mentioning Kayla will remind us of the pain of losing her. But we are always aware that she is missing from our lives. Go ahead and speak our daughter's name out loud. Saying ‘Kayla’ could never cause us pain. We speak her name every day with love, joy, tears, and laughter. When you say Kayla's name, we'll know you are thinking of her, too.” – Eric and Laurie

GRIEF IS NATURAL

GRIEF IS A NATURAL part of the human experience, but like a rebellious teenager, grief does not adhere to rules, timelines, or boundaries.

Because grief is an individualized mix of emotions person-by-person, loss-by-loss—those emotions may change throughout one's lifetime. Multiple factors affect the impact of loss. Indeed, a loss does not necessarily evoke grief.



GRIEF IS PERSONAL

GRIEF AND THE AFTERMATH are intensely personal. So, if your sentence to a griever starts with “You should,” then you should re-think what you are about to say.

The group agreed that not every griever feels like talking. But if they do? Helping by listening means: Listening while also avoiding rigid expectations or assumptions about the grief experience.

*“When my sister died in an accident, it cracked the family foundation. When my dad died not too long afterwards, the crack gave way to crumble. My advice? Allow people to grieve in their own way. Just listen when I need you to, and please make an extra effort not to appear judgmental.” – T**

Judging, or rather not judging, is reciprocal, as Bill explains from the griever's perspective:

“I won't judge what you are saying. I can see it's awkward for you to try to find the right words to say. There are no right words, but thank you for saying something.” – Bill



BEING RESOURCEFUL

THE SUDDEN DEATH OF a loved one can create a void of comparatively fewer grief support resources. Some who experienced sudden grief reached out to or were introduced to non-profit, bereavement support organizations that strive to fill a gap.

"When I went to the meeting, I met other parents whose adult children died 6, 8, and 10 years ago. Those parents were still standing, living, and even smiling. They understood me."
– Martina

On the sensitive topic of children and grief, society tends to overlook children as grievers. Children do grieve, albeit differently than adults and need different resources. Depending on factors related to a child's age and emotional and cognitive development, a child may not have—or retain—tangible memories of the person who died. Children can benefit from others' sharing stories, photographs, letters, or mementos.

"I remember that I did not want anyone to feel sorry for me because my Mama died. But I also remember how comforted I felt hearing stories about Mama and how much she was loved." – Ginger

Many of the group took comfort in faith-based and religious traditions, customs, and organized services. Whether unshakeable, cornerstone beliefs that soothe the soul, or agonizing, house-rattling disbelief in times of unspeakable grief pain, or somewhere in between, two common themes resonated: an appreciation of others' avoiding assumptions about faith and respect for religious freedom.

"For me, only God offers full recovery from this grief." – Jill



COMMUNICATION MATTERS

COMMUNICATION TECHNIQUES EXPERIENCED by the group include condolence cards, handwritten letters, e-mail, telephone calls, text messages, and in-person visits, as well as online social networking, social media, and music.

"My daughter was very close with her grandfather—my father. After he died, some of the condolence cards we received included Emily's name. It may sound like a 'small thing,' but it meant a lot." – Kevin

Handwritten cards and letters, perceived as a fading tradition, preserve the personality unique to each writer. The 10 minutes invested in writing a letter of remembrance may yield years of precious memories.

"As kids, we didn't really know anything about my dad's job. Mother saved the letters she received after he died. Now that I'm an adult, the letters from his co-workers describing how much my dad meant to them in their lives help me to know him even better." – Deb

The use of trending online social networking and social media for death announcements and condolence messages varied greatly among the group.

"Jessica was 'Army Strong,' making all the funeral arrangements for Josh (her brother). We didn't use it, but she used online social networking to let people know, and received a lot of support that way."
– Martina and Scott, Jessica and Josh's parents

"I don't do social media. My best friend from high school called me on the phone. He said, 'I love you, man. I'm sorry to hear your dad died.' He lives on the other side of the country and we hadn't talked in years. That phone call meant so much to me." – Bill

Even talking on the telephone was difficult during the most sob-filled days and nights of Martina's life following the sudden death of her son. However, she found solace in receiving e-mail and text messages, which gave her the breathing space to read and respond how and when she had the physical and emotional energy to do so.

For Jennifer, phone calls and e-mail would have interrupted the sharing of final, father-daughter sentiments of love and a life well-lived. While keeping vigil at her father's bedside, text messages from her husband and close friends offered an unobtrusive source of support from far away.



Via social media, on what would have been Kayla's 13th birthday, an extended network of teenagers and adults replaced their online profile pictures with "Kisses4Kayla," a graphical image created to honor and remember the spunky pre-teen. It warmed her mother Laurie's grieving heart to read the electronic cavalcade of birthday tributes to her daughter's high-spirited, though too-short, life.

Music, perhaps the original “social media,” endures as a communication channel among groups of people, and as a channel into the memories of an individual’s heart and soul.

“My son and I shared a love of music. I made CDs of his music and gave them as gifts. Listening to his music keeps him close to me.” – Scott



PAY IT FORWARD

WHILE MUSIC EVOKES PAST memories, the concept of paying it forward in memory of a loved one resonates profoundly throughout the group:

“Creating a scholarship in my brother’s memory gave me a purpose for my grief.” – Mark

“When I see a homeless person on the street, I look him in the eye and say, ‘this (money I am giving you) is in memory of my son, Joshua.’” – Martina

“In keeping with how Kayla lived her life, we asked people to perform a ‘Random Act of Kindness’ in our daughter’s memory. We were overwhelmed by the positive feedback we received. It lifted our spirits.” – Eric and Laurie



GIVING VOICE TO GRIEF

IT IS HOPED THESE heartfelt voices help you discover your own words or ideas to support someone who is grieving.

In saying goodbye for now, know that the group’s spirit of sharing flows from the people who were loved, and who are still loved, deeply, dearly, daily.

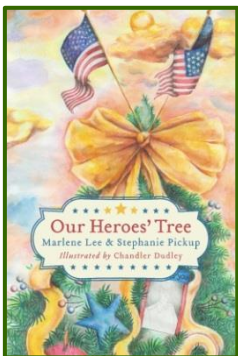
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Marlene Lee is the author of *The Hero in My Pocket* and co-author of *That’s My Hope* and *Our Heroes’ Tree* (e-book). In 2005, she co-founded Our Heroes’ Tree. Marlene was recognized for volunteer service at (the former) Walter Reed Army Medical Center, and was named National Capital Area American Red Cross Volunteer of the Year, Disaster Support Services.

Marlene earned an MA in Thanatology from Hood College and a BA in Communications from the University of Maryland.



Our Heroes’ Tree e-book
illustrated by
Chandler Dudley
Available via:
amazon.com
Apple iBooks Store
BarnesandNoble.com



Who can participate in Our Heroes’ Tree?

All of us. Any time of the year.

What kind of tree should I use?

The tree is a symbol of family, strength, and resilience. Select the tree that works best for you or your group (e.g., living, virtual, artificial, paper, indoors, outdoors, etc.).

What is Our Heroes’ Tree?

Our Heroes’ Tree is a themed display of appreciation for the service and sacrifice of U.S. service members and their families.

Decorate Our Heroes’ Tree with flags, yellow ribbon, photos, and ornaments created in honor of those who are serving or have served in the U.S. Armed Forces.

Free Planning Guide available on Our Heroes’ Tree website: heroestree.com

Look for Our Heroes’ Tree Program on Pinterest and Facebook and on Twitter @OurHeroesTree

Reflect



Remember



Rejoice