

What Not to Say to Someone Suffering Or What Should Not be Allowed in a Support Group

The Stephen Ministry undertook an extensive survey of people suffering from an assortment of issues. One of the questions focused on comments made to them that were not helpful. You can share these with your groups in an effort to avoid them.

- A. "I know how you feel." (100% of respondents disliked this or any variation)
- B. "It's for the best." (100%)
- C. "Keep a stiff upper lip." (98%)
- D. "At least..."
- E. "You should or shouldn't"
- F. "God doesn't give you more than you can handle" (88%)
- G. "It's God's will." (93%)

Reaching Out . . . Do's and Don'ts

Do remember that you can't take away their pain, but you can share it and help them feel less alone.

Do let your genuine concern and care show.

Do treat the couple equally. Fathers need as much support as mothers.

Do be available . . . to listen, to run errands, to drive, help with the other children, or whatever else seems needed at the time.

Do say you are sorry about what happened to their child and about their pain.

Do accept their moods whatever they may be, you are not here to judge. Be sensitive to shifting moods.

Do allow them to talk about the child that has died as much as often as they want.

Do talk about the special, endearing qualities of the child.

Do give special attention to the child's brother(s) and sister(s) – at the funeral and in the months to come (they too are hurt and confused and in need of attention which their parents may not be able to give).

Do reassure the parents that they did everything they could, that the care the child received was the best possible.

Do put on your calendar the birth and death date of the child and remember the family in the following years. Remembering the child is very supportive.

Do extend invitations to them. But understand if they decline or change their minds at the last minute. Above all, continue to call and visit.
Do send a personal note or letter and/or make a contribution to a charity that is meaningful to the family.
Do get literature about the disease and grief process to help you understand.
Don't think that the age of the child determines his/her value and impact.
Don't be afraid to touch, it can often be more comforting than words.
Don't avoid the family because you feel helpless, uncomfortable, or don't know what to say.
Don't change the subject when they mention their child.
Don't push the parents through the grieving process; it takes a long time to heal and they never forget.

Don't encourage the use of drugs or alcohol.
Don't ask them how they feel if you aren't willing to listen.
Don't say you know how they feel, unless you've lost a child yourself.
Don't tell them what they should feel or do.
Don't try to find something positive in the child's death.
Don't point out that at least they have and/or should be grateful for their other children.
Don't say that they can always have another child.
Don't think that death puts a ban on laughter. There is much enjoyment in the memory of the time they had together.

Avoid the following clichés-

“It was God's will or it was a blessing.”
“You're young, you'll get over it.”
“At least it wasn't older.”
“Get on with your life. This isn't the end of the world.”
“God needed another flower for his garden.”
“You must be strong for the other children.”
“Be brave, don't cry.”
“Time will heal.”
“You're doing so well.”

PLEASE, SEE ME THROUGH MY TEARS *by Kelly Osmont, 1982*

Adapted by from suggestions by The Compassionate Friends, Batesville Management Services, KMG, and SHARE.

You asked, “How are you doing?” As I told you, tears came to my eyes. . . you immediately began to talk again, your eyes looked away from me, your speech picked up, and all the attention you had given me went away. . .

How am I doing? I do better when people will listen to my response, even though I may shed a tear or two. . . for I so want their attention; but to be ignored because I have in me pain which is indescribably to anyone who has not been there. . . I hurt and feel angry. So when you look away, I am again alone with it. . .

Really, tears are not a bad sign, you know! They're Nature's way of helping me to heal. . . They relieve some of the stress or sadness. I know you fear that asking how I'm doing brought this sadness to me. . . NO, you're wrong. . . the memory of my son's death will always be with me, only a thought away. It's just that my tears make my pain more visible to you. . . but you did not give me the pain. It's just there.

When I cry, could it be that you feel helpless? You're not, you know. When I feel your permission to allow my tears to flow, you've helped me more than you can know. You need not verbalize your support of my tears, your silence as I cry is my key – do not fear.

Your listening with your heart to “How are you doing?” helps relieve the pain, because once

I allow the tears to come and go, I feel lighter. Talking to you releases things I've been wanting to say aloud, and then there's space for a touch of joy in my life.

Honest, when I tear up and cry, that doesn't mean I'll cry forever – maybe just a minute or two, then I'll wipe the tears away, and sometimes you'll even find I'm laughing at something funny ten minute later.

When I hold back my tears, my throat grows tight, my chest aches and my stomach begins to knot up. . . because I'm trying to protect you from my tears. . . then we both hurt. . . me, because I've kept the pain inside and it's a shield against our closeness, and then you hurt because suddenly, we're distant.

Please, take my hand and I promise not to cry forever (it's physically impossible, you know.) When you see me through my tears. . . then we can be close again.