

# Do's and Don'ts for Comforting Grieving Families After a Suicide

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"What miserable comforters you all are!" (Job 16:2b).



(Courtesy of Dawn Anderson)

After my husband died by suicide, most people were wonderful, but a few said inappropriate things that made this difficult time harder. I'm now a pastor and facilitator for Christian Survivors of Suicide support group in Dallas, and have heard many comforter "horror stories" similar to Job's over the years.

I believe most "miserable comforters" genuinely want to help the grieving person, but are making the mistaken assumption that there are "magic words" that relieve pain.

This misguided belief causes the would-be comforter to not realize how certain remarks actually feel to a person in deep grief. I asked survivors of loved ones' suicides to tell me the worst things people said to them in their times of grief, and have attempted to categorize those remarks by the feelings they invoked in the survivors.

## Minimizing the loss:

"At least you have other children."

"You're strong; you can handle it."

"You have so much to be grateful for."

"Well he was bipolar, right? Could have seen that coming."

These types of comments add to the pain of grief because they attempt to reduce the loss and make it seem less painful, rather than recognizing the deep suffering the suicide survivor is experiencing.

## Giving unsolicited advice:

"You need to get over it and move on."

"Be strong."

"You'll find a new girl."

As with the minimizing remarks, a grieving person needs to feel sad in the present and not think about the future right now. To griever, these feeble attempts to motivate or cheer them up feel like the speaker is telling them to ignore the pain they are currently feeling.

### **Spiritualizing the loss:**

"God doesn't give you more than you can handle."

"Everything happens for a reason."

"You know she's in hell, don't you?"

"He is in a better place."

No major religion teaches anymore that death by suicide automatically means hell, but this merciless thought persists, inferring that God punishes people for being sick.

In our broken world, unspeakable tragedies occur daily, but that doesn't mean God causes or approves of those tragedies.

Sadly some grieving people have turned away from God as their ultimate source of comfort because of such misguided beliefs. Similarly, assuring someone that their loved one is in heaven is not helpful to a survivor in early grief when the mindset is: "BUT I WANT HIM HERE WITH ME!"

### **Asking painful personal questions:**

"Why do you think he did this?"

"How did she do it?"

"Did she leave a note?"

"Did you have to clean up?"

It is human nature to be curious, but probing questions about the intimate details of the suicide are invasive and hurtful. Those who genuinely care about grieving persons should let them decide when and how much they want to tell about their loved one's death.

### **Implying blame:**

"Did you see this coming?"

"What is going on in your family? This sounds hereditary."

"Probably [something the survivor did] is what sent him over the edge."

To suggest that any of the people left behind by a suicide contributed to that death in any way is cruel. Suicide survivors almost universally struggle with thoughts like, "If I had only [fill in the blank], my loved one might still be alive."

The last thing a person suffering suicide grief needs is a statement implying guilt on their part, or that they or their family is defective.

Experts estimate that 90 percent of people who die by suicide suffer from a mental illness, whether diagnosed or not. It's no more appropriate to assign blame for a death from mental illness than it would be to look for blame in a death from another disease.

### **Saying negative things about the person who died:**

"What a selfish thing to do."

"She chose to leave you."

"It's too bad his faith wasn't strong enough."

Although anger toward the one who died is often part of the grieving process, it is never appropriate to say negative things about the deceased to the grieving family. Any comment that implies suicide was a choice, rational or not, lacks understanding. A person who dies by suicide sees death as the only alternative to unbearable torment — not as a "choice."

Suggesting that a person in such psychological pain was trying to hurt those left behind shows a profound lack of compassion and understanding of mental illness.

If there was one change I could make in the way we talk about suicide, it would be to remove the word COMMITTED from the usual vocabulary.

The word "committed" invokes language usually reserved for crimes. Most survivors prefer saying "died by suicide," to honor their loved one's illness in a more appropriate way.

As for comments inferring the person who died by suicide was weak in faith, it's important to realize many devout Christians suffer from mental illness.

No one would dream of saying to a diabetic, "If you prayed harder, you wouldn't have high blood sugar." But it's amazing how often Christians at least suggest to those suffering from mental disorders that a stronger faith will "cure" them.

Remember how the apostle Paul struggled with the "thorn in his side"? God did not heal him, but rather offered grace.

### **What TO say:**

We've been talking about what NOT to say; let's end with what TO say. I also asked suicide survivors what were the most helpful things people said (or that they wish they'd said) after the loss. Here is a sample of those comments.

"Tell me a good memory you have of my loved one."

"I can't imagine how much pain you're in. We hurt, too, because we loved him."

"I love you, and my prayers are with you."

"What a terrible loss for your family."

"The best thing someone could have said was NOTHING!"

"He had value; he will be missed; he was a good person."

"Focus on the way they lived and loved, not the way they died."

"How can I help you today?" (Following through with errands, grocery shopping, cleaning, going to church with them, etc.)

"I am so sorry for your loss. Words fail."

"I'm here."

And even better, many of the survivors I surveyed mentioned that the best reaction was not words at all, but a hug. They talked about being comforted by the caring presence of friends, and the assurance that others were praying for them.

The best advice to anyone who wants to comfort a suicide survivor is: "Show up, let them see you care, and respect the griever's right to feel bad for a while (guilt, anger, sadness, etc.). Too many survivors reported "friends" who avoided them altogether after their loved ones' suicides rather than to risk saying the wrong thing. Please don't do that, because that hurts most of all.

Read more at <http://www.christianpost.com/news/dos-and-donts-for-comforting-grieving-families-after-a-suicide-125767/#wXe3BKEYJW6GYXOL.99>

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