

## What You Wish Your Comforters Knew about Grief

### *And how to tell them!*

The holidays are a time when you come into contact with friends, coworkers and families more so than at other times of the year. As you interact with these people at holiday gatherings and other places, in an attempt to comfort you they will often say or do things that have the opposite effect. Most people are well-meaning, but they do not know how to react to you or how to best help you.

The solution to this dilemma is for you to be honest about your feelings with people and to communicate your needs and concerns—this can be done in person or in a letter. Often, the best time to communicate is before you end up in an uncomfortable situation with a well-meaning, but clueless, comforter.

Our Surviving the Holidays experts share further ideas on how to communicate with your comforters.

“If somebody is trying to walk alongside of you after a significant loss,” says Dr. Robert De Vries, “this person has no clue about how you feel, what you think, what you need and what you want. The only solution is to tell them.”

H. Norman Wright says that for those people who are trying to rush you through grief, it is best to say, “I appreciate what you’re trying to do, but my grief is going to last probably twenty times longer than most people expect. It’s going to be more intense. Let me cry; let me feel the way I’m feeling, and I would deeply appreciate it. And to help you understand me, here’s a little book on grief, and by reading this, you’ll have a better idea of what’s going on within me.”

“It’s so important to be honest with people,” explains Elsa Kok Colopy. “Many times we feel like we need to cover up our bad feelings, cover up our sadness, cover up our grief for the benefit of others. You don’t have to do that. You can express what you need.”

H. Norman Wright suggests that you write a grief letter to pass out to your comforters, which will help them know how to best relate to you during this time. “In that letter you identify here’s what I’ve experienced, here’s what’s going on with me and here’s what you can expect from me. You don’t have to try to fix me. Let me cry, and I’ll recover in my own timing. Here’s the best things for you to do.” You then identify what you need from people in the letter, and pass this out prior to or during holiday gatherings or send it in an email. When people ask, “How are you?” simply respond, “Thanks for asking, here . . . this will explain it better than I can.” This is a positive action you can take to help your comforters, and ultimately, to help you!

Take a moment to think about situations you’ve experienced where your would-be comforters were insensitive in their attempts to help you. Now, in response to those situations, what do you wish your comforters would have done differently? What do you wish they understood about your grief? What helpful advice could you give to your comforters?

Here are ideas of needs or concerns you may want to communicate to people around you:


- Please talk about my deceased loved one at holiday gatherings.
- Be a quiet listener, and let me talk about my loved one and share memories.
- Ignoring my grief does not make it go away.
- If I am sad, let me be sad. Do not try to cheer me up. It’s important for me to feel the emotions I am feeling,



even though this is considered a season of “cheer.”

- Sometimes it may appear that I’m functioning fine and that I’m doing well. Understand that outward appearances can be deceiving.
- Don’t make comments about next year being better or time healing my wounds; my concerns are focused on the here and now.
- Understand that I can’t do everything I used to do in holidays past, but don’t hesitate to invite me to holiday events anyway.
- Let me cry if I need to. You don’t have to say anything—just hand me tissues and be there for me.
- Understand that grief can go on for a number of years. There is no established time limit. Please don’t make judgments about how long it’s taking me to grieve.
- Other ideas: \_\_\_\_\_

The above advice, and any further ideas that you have, would be wonderful for your friends and family members to know. It would make things a bit easier not only for you, but also for your comforters. Use this holiday season as an opportunity to practice being honest with people around you and to be assertive in communicating your needs.



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