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No right way: Let behavior of grieving person guide your show of support

By Crystal Boyles
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Death happens every day, but oftentimes people don't know how to address a coworker or friend who has suffered from the loss.

Should you give them a hug? Should you touch them at all? Should you say anything? What should you say? What will you do if they cry?

Fretting about what the perfect words are to ease the pain is a waste of time, as nothing anyone says will ease the loss.

When the Rev. George West's brother died several months ago, the thing he found most comforting was people just being around, sitting with him, giving him a pat on the back, a handshake.

"There are times just being there in that non-anxious way is more meaningful than saying or doing something," said Mr. West, who is the chaplain and director of pastoral services at AnMed Health.

Be empathetic and not seek to give answers, he said.

"Be available to listen and to be with the person and that is to be a presence that is sensitive, caring, compassionate and non-anxious," he said.

Instead of saying words of comfort, people often say inappropriate things such as "You can always remarry."

"I think the safest thing people can say is 'I'm sorry' and that you care about them and support them," said Pam Cox, community education coordinator for Hospice of the Upstate.

Even if the words don't sound perfect to you, people know you mean well, she said.

Before going and giving the person a hug, think. Do I normally hug them? Are they a huggy type of person? Would that weird them out?

So ask if you could give them a hug.

Ask if they're OK. Ask if they want to talk about it.

"Because somebody has experienced death doesn't mean they're a different person," Mrs. Cox said.

Sometimes it's harder to know how to address a grieving co-worker whom you don't know well, than it is a friend who you've known forever.

In a grief program, Hospice of the Upstate talks to companies about how to handle grief in the office and what can be expected out of a grieving employee.

Most importantly, though, think about the person you're addressing and how they would want to be consoled, not how you would want to be consoled, Mrs. Cox said.

Watch people's body language and listen to their voice intonations, as everyone grieves differently, Mr. West said.

"It think it's appropriate to acknowledge through words and a card and e-mail that (loss), but attend to these various clues this person may give about their readiness to receive support," he said.

Be sensitive.

Don't say you understand how the grieving person feels.

"Even though you've had the exact same loss, we don't know how other people feel," said Mrs. Cox, a former bereavement coordinator.

Even if you don't know the deceased well, go to the funeral, sign the book, and show your support for those grieving. Even if you don't get to speak to the grieving they will know you were there, she said.

Seeing people at the funeral, having them come through the house or the funeral home during visitations reminds the family their loved one, as well as themselves, were cared for.

If you want to help, don't ask the grieving to call you if they need anything and don't ask them what they need; they likely don't know, Mrs. Cox said.

"When there has been a death, the grieving person is so stunned and not thinking straight that you can't go up to them and say, "Do you need...?," she said. "Instead, talk to some other relative in the family that's helping out if you're trying to get specifics."

Or just say, "I'll call you tomorrow." Don't tell them to call you because they won't. Call them. Check on them, Mrs. Cox said. Although people need help and support right after loss happens, people need the support more a month later when the reality sets in, she said.

"If you take all those casseroles and spread them out over a month, that would be so much better," she said. "I really find that about six months out people start bottoming out."

Sometimes widows feel very funny about men coming over. So come over to the house to help out as a couple, Mrs. Cox said.

It's OK to send a card on holidays or anniversaries, events that were special to the couple. Those days are hard, too.

"I think it's appropriate to just send a card sometimes. I'm just thinking of you card or a phone call," Mr. West said.

Remember, the grieving's life is forever changed and there's no one way to handle the situation, no one thing to say to make it all go away.

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