

GRIEF TALK

Revolution



It's Time to
Talk About
the Elephant
in the Room

Sample
Chapter

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Here is your sample chapter taken from *Grief Talk Revolution: It's Time to Talk About the Elephant in the Room*. Visit [Amazon](#) for paperback and Kindle formats of the book.

THE INVISIBLE FACES OF GRIEF

Grief is the journey. Gratitude is the destination.

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PLEASE DON'T SAY YOU UNDERSTAND HOW I FEEL

When offering condolences, know that it is not always what is said, but how the individual perceives what is said. Within 24 to 48 hours of notification of a death, you will hear many statements, comments, and expressions of sympathy from others who are trying to support you through your grief and make you feel better. Unfortunately, the majority of these are not helpful. Many can actually be hurtful and even prolong the intense heartbreak and pain of coping with your loss.

While having all good intent, it is not our fault that we say things that don't help. We are not educated on the topic, so we say what we've always heard and said in our sincere attempt to express empathy, sympathy, and concern.

Here is your crash course in "What Not to Say and Best Things to Say to Someone Who is Grieving." I will only share a few of the more commonly used expressions.

What Not to Say to Someone Who is Grieving:

I understand how you feel. This is a common response when one's experience with loss is similar. However, no one can really understand how you feel because no one knows the exact intimate relationship you shared with your loved one or did not share at the time of the death. No one knows the personal emotions you are internalizing at this time as it relates to the deceased, the relationship at the time of the loss, or the circumstances surrounding it. Remember, your grief is unique to you!

I've made arrangements with five siblings burying the same birth mother, and each expressed a different emotional response to loss. One very stoic, wanting to take care of the business and exhibiting no outward 'typical' emotions of grief; one too distraught to participate in the interment conference because she had not spoken to her mother in several years; one angry at the medical staff who treated her mother; one refusing to agree on the final disposition of the body because she didn't get to say goodbye; one angry with me for asking the necessary questions. All were expressing their personal responses to the loss of their mother. Although expressing anger and judgment between each other, neither was right nor wrong.

You will get over it. Let go. Time heals all wounds. This is behind you now. You need to move on. Don't rush or try to fix a person's grief or try to get them to avoid or deny the feelings associated with it. Grief doesn't follow a mandated timeline. It is never eradicated; it is only experienced. You don't forget or get over it. You will accept that the physical body is no longer present, but the cherished memories remain. Many create rituals for a continued connection and bond with loved ones beyond the physical death. Break your arm, and there is a process for healing. You get the necessary medical attention to repair the break, physical therapy for correct healing, and with time you resume normal activities. However, the reminder of that break is always there. You will never forget your loved one or the shared memories, but you transition to a place where you can hold the loss and your new sense of normalcy in the same space. You will integrate the loss into your life as you begin to embrace your future.

Not understanding this, oftentimes, others will distance themselves because they're tired of hearing the repeated expressions of loss and feel the person needs to let it go and quickly move on.

It was just God's will. He's in a better place now. God doesn't make any mistakes. Before you tune me out, give me a chance to further share here. Unless the grieving individual is where you are, on the same level spiritually, and can receive what you are saying, this statement does not help and may even anger one who is grieving. This is not the appropriate time to force your personal beliefs on another.

I received a call from a mother who had just delivered a stillbirth. Of course, distraught with questions of why, why, why. I didn't know her personally, so what if I had responded, "Well, it was just God's will?" and she replied, "well, tell me why God would allow me to carry my daughter for nine months, go to all my prenatal care visits, eat healthy for my baby and me, listen to her heartbeat hours before the birth, and kill her during the delivery? What did I do so bad to anger God?" I don't think I could answer that.

Death can allow one to question or even become angry at God in that moment. It might also allow one to become closer to God as they rely on their faith for comfort, strength, and hope. The occurrence of death does not discriminate based on religious beliefs or lack thereof, so be sensitive and non-judgmental to one's beliefs and values when offering condolences of a religious nature.

Keep busy so you don't think about it. Trying to avoid grief delays the grieving process. It forces the person to move away from or completely ignore the pain, feelings, and emotions, and delays the essential step of actually acknowledging and accepting the death. Until you do so, you can't successfully move forward with your life. It is natural to think of your loved one, especially on special days such as anniversaries, birthdays, holidays, or during special events. You don't want the person to just move on and never face the grief head-on because it will become unresolved grief, which can show up in other areas of life, even many years later. Giving coping suggestions that distract one from grieving is counterproductive to the necessary grief work, such as stopping going to the cemetery every day, getting rid of the clothes and photos, stopping looking at the scrapbooks, etc. You must fully grieve the loss, not isolate or deny it.

You are being selfish. I've frequently heard this from the pulpit during delivery of the eulogy. To telling one that grieving is selfish is asking them to deny their normal and natural responses to loss and can lead to denied or unresolved grief. Unresolved grief can manifest in the unhealthy physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual wellbeing of a person with short and long-term effects.

Best Things to Say to Someone Who is Grieving:

You will notice that saying less is better.

I can't imagine how you feel, but I am here for you. A true and compassionate response. It is not invasive and allows the person to open up and share if they choose to.

I wish I had the right words; please know that I care. This is safe, appropriate, and keeps you from saying all the wrong things.

Silence is golden. Oftentimes we don't need to talk. Simply being present for the person indicates your care and concern. This also allows you to give them the greatest gift you can at this time... being

there to listen. Let them share as much or as little as they like. No attempts on your part to judge, fix, or cure them! Do not attempt to stop the tears. Let them cry!

My condolences on your loss. One that we are all familiar with and safe. Don't follow up with questions, such as "What happened?" as they might not feel comfortable with sharing at this time.

I worked with parents making arrangements for their daughter, who died by suicide. She was an honor student, the life of the party, the girl with the biggest smile, cheerleader, and so much more they shared. Of course, everyone wanted to know what happened. Still shocked and labored with guilt and embarrassment, they opted for a private service, left their home, and moved away. Literally disappearing to avoid sharing about their loss.

We all need support at times like this. I am here for you. Please only say this if you mean it. If you personally know the person and know their routines, offer to do something you know they always do, i.e., take the parent for medical appointments, drop off the children at school, walk the dog, do the grocery shopping, etc. Try not to say, "Call me if you need anything," but offer to do a specific task instead.

I'm sure you've heard that action speaks louder than words. Just be there for them, but don't overstay your welcome as they need space to grieve. A hug with no words is comforting. Offer to do routines as little things mean a lot at a time like this, i.e., groceries, children to activities, etc. Fix meals. Make notification phone calls. Accompany them to make arrangements. Be there to listen in a non-judgmental fashion. Let them grieve!

To Say or Not to Say?

I'm sorry for your loss. This one can go either way. I used it all the time when assisting families until one incident. Walking with a family to verify her mother's gravesite, I said, "I'm sorry for your loss." She stopped, stared at me, and responded, "How dare you belittle me. Don't feel sorry for me. I am not a victim," and a few other words. I was clueless about how my good intention caused upset and disconnect for my client. She shared how her mother was the family's matriarch, how proud she was of her life, and how that statement was offensive to her.

Remember, it is not what we say but how the person perceives what we say. I don't use that expression of sympathy anymore, but I wouldn't put it in the list of things not to say.

It still amazes me how little we know about grief. Even as death care professionals working with grieving families each day, we were never given training in grief education. Medical students do not have grief education as part of their required curriculum. We must do more!

THE UNINTENTIONAL KILLER OF EMPATHY

Empathy is defined by Merriam-Webster as “the action of understanding, being aware of, being sensitive to, and vicariously experiencing the feelings, thoughts, and experience of another of either the past or present without having the feelings, thoughts, and experience fully communicated in an objectively explicit manner.”

Our intent for offering empathy is genuine care and concern for the bereaved. We say what we hope will ease the pain, bring peace and comfort, and make one feel better (however we define better). In attempting to do so, we will use a comparative analysis, hoping it invokes a sense of gratitude, a temporary feeling of satisfaction or replacement, and a feeling of the situation not being so bad. Here are examples of how we do this:

At least you are young and can have other children.

At least you got a chance to say goodbye.

At least he didn't suffer.

At least you were married for 45 years.

At least you got to hold your baby.

At least you have two other children.

At least your mother got to celebrate her 90th birthday.

At least your sister got to see her first grandchild.

At least they caught the person who killed your son.

At least she is no longer in pain.

At least you got to take that planned vacation together.

At least now he is in a better place.

At least you were able to spend last Christmas together.

At least... At least... At least....

If you take nothing else away from this section, remember this. **Empathy never begins with “at least.”**

PLEASE DON'T JUDGE ME

Grief manifests itself in many ways. One's thoughts, beliefs, morals, religious or spiritual preferences, family traditions, the afterlife, likes, or dislikes should not be judged. There is no right or wrong way to express one's thoughts, beliefs, or decisions relating to loss, death, and grief. Be mindful that it is not your story, but the story, beliefs, and opinions of the one who is grieving.

I learned this the hard way while assisting families when working in the death care industry and sometimes internally judging others' thoughts, beliefs, and decisions. I will share a few incidences that might resonate with you.

A husband comes in to make arrangements for his wife and brings his nine-year-old granddaughter with him. I immediately get coloring and activity books for the little girl and usher her to the side of the room. He stops me and informs me that she is a part of this and will assist with making the arrangements for her grandmother. I always thought that children of this age were pretty much not included in making funeral arrangements. **I judged!** By the way, the little girl was very involved with answering questions and helping her grandfather with decisions.

A daughter making arrangements for her mother and adamantly refusing to design or purchase a memorial for the gravesite. She doesn't believe in coming to the cemetery on the day of service or any time after that. Her mother isn't there. I internally thought, how cruel? It's your mother, and you won't attend the service or even mark her gravesite? **I judged.** The physical body indeed is not there, and we can't decide how one connects with spirit or continues the bond after the physical death. It is up to the individual whether they choose to memorialize and/or visit the final resting place of the remains for solace, rituals, remembrance, etc.

It was an honor to work with the late Dr. Dorothy Height, National Council of Negro Women, on the occasions of making her cemetery pre-arrangements and facilitating her entombment. Esteemed guests came from all over on the day of her service, and I overheard a woman comment, "Why didn't they bury her in a private estate?" I couldn't respond, but I would have said, "Dr. Height selected her site before her death. This was her personal preference." **That lady judged.** It was heartwarming for me to remember the day Dr. Height and her entourage visited the cemetery. I toured them, she made her mausoleum selection and invited me to her home to complete the necessary paperwork.

How about options such as cremation, traditional ground or lawn crypt burial, mausoleum entombment, or private estates? I learned so much about personal choices versus family traditions in this regard. Today, many decisions regarding the final disposition of the body are based on the environment, fears, religion, ego, status, etc. Whether the deceased left their final wishes, or the family members decide, it is a personal preference. Cremation is no longer an option based merely on financial circumstances. **Don't judge.**

No, we aren't having a funeral. Instead, we're having a football party at the stadium after the football game on Sunday. We've rented out the stadium because he organized the fan club of our football team. Everyone is wearing the team jersey. What? Is this an appropriate way to honor the life of such an esteemed, well-respected professional in the community? **I judged.** There are endless ways to personalize a celebration of life, and memorialization options available today include everything from

personalized jewelry for cremated remains (ashes), celebrations at sea, burying a memory capsule, purchasing and naming a star, to sending your loved one's cremains into outer space!

One day I left the room due to the intense verbal abuse from a mother making arrangements for her son who was a victim of gun violence. Her behavior during the interment conference and the language she used were unacceptable. After refusing to work with her but being sent back into the room by my manager, I simply did what I had to do. Weeks later, she came in to apologize and asked me to accompany her to her son's gravesite, which became a weekly event. She went on to pen a book during those weekly visits, and years later, I still hear from her occasionally. **I judged.** We can't judge one's behavior at this time or even take it personal. It is usually not against us. We have no idea what they are feeling on the inside.

"Dora, can I dig him up and kill him again?" A life coaching client's grief turned to extreme anger as she was forced to reboot her entire life from scratch after ten years of marriage. Her husband never changed the beneficiary on any of his policies or legal documents, and she now has to leave the house and the proceeds of the life insurance policy, along with the house, all go to his former wife. Her family and friends have ridiculed, chastised, blamed, and embarrassed her. **They judged.** Many find it challenging, or even unnecessary, to have important conversations regarding finances, insurance, wills, medical, and end-of-life instructions. Having these conversations is a gift that we give our loved ones.

An interment conference that is etched in my mind forever. A mother burying her two-year-old daughter who had been brutally raped, beaten, and burned. She refused to come inside the office to make arrangements. It took me over two hours talking to her to get her to come inside. Some said, "How terrible of her to not want to make arrangements for her own child." Others said, "It must have been her fault, and she is guilty of leaving her child with that person." Others said, "Maybe her grief is just unbearable." And some said, "She is just making a scene to get media attention because the news cameras are filming." **They judged.** Her reason for not wanting to come inside was irrelevant, and we had no idea what was going through her mind at that time. I couldn't begin to imagine! Think of times you have watched or heard news stories of family members sharing their grief and you voiced your opinion of the situation. **Please don't judge.**

The widower came for grief coaching after losing his wife of over 45 years, saying, "Dora, I just want to have fun." What does that mean, some might ask after being married for so many years? You might feel that was inappropriate, disrespectful to his deceased wife, not how he should feel, etc. Were his expectations for coaching right or wrong? Neither, only right for him. **You probably just judged!** The grief coaching sessions revealed that he had cared for his wife for many years during her illness and simply wanted to get back to doing things that he had not been able to do as a full-time caregiver. He accepted that his life must continue.

Stop going to the cemetery, many will suggest. One businessman visited and placed flowers on his wife's mausoleum crypt every Sunday. This lasted for not one, two, or three years, but more than five years. He came faithfully each Sunday after church. He continued to run his business, serve in his church, date, and move forward, yet he continued his weekly ritual of remembrance. Many said he should seek help. **They judged.**

A woman fed up with being ridiculed when sharing how she felt after her husband's passing came for grief coaching support. She cared for him during a long illness before his passing. She watched his

body, mind, and desire to live deteriorate. She put her life on hold to give him 24/7 care and attention. “Dora, they keep telling me to stop saying that I feel a sense of relief. Is it wrong to feel this way? Am I grieving incorrectly? Am I not following the proper stages of grief?” **They judged.** There is no right or wrong way to grieve, and everyone’s emotional response to loss is their own. No cookie-cutter approach, no one size fits all. Grief is not linear!

What about signs, dreams, birds, butterflies, spirits, or strange unexplainable phenomena? Before leaving the house for my mother’s funeral service, I felt the need to take a walk around the corner... no real reason why. Coming back, a dime fell on the ground in front of me. I didn’t have a purse, no coat on, no pockets, and nothing in my hands. I looked up, and there was only the tree that I was under. What? How could a dime fall from the tree? I picked it up and headed back. As I opened the front door, what? Another dime on the doorstep! This dime phenomenon continues to this very day and validates my continued bond and connection to my mother. **Please don’t judge me.**

THE DOMINO EFFECT

The loss of someone you love can often lead to a domino effect of subsequent losses resulting from the death. Secondary losses are often overlooked and misunderstood as others only focus on the loss of the person.

A widow might experience the following secondary losses:

- Loss of identity as a couple
- Loss of income/financial security
- Loss of support systems
- Loss of faith/belief system/spirituality
- Loss of intimacy
- Loss of dreams for the future
- Loss of confidence
- Loss of companionship
- Loss of decision making
- Loss of self-worth
- Loss of purpose
- Loss of sense of belonging
- Loss of relationships

It can be challenging to come to terms with feeling robbed of your hopes, dreams, and expectations for your life. Still, you must allow yourself to grieve any secondary losses and make any necessary adjustments or changes. Be open to sharing your feelings and seek support when needed.

I DON'T HAVE THE PLAGUE

No one can truly understand or define the significance of the love you shared and the impact of your loss. Even more painful than saying all the wrong things or judging is avoidance. The reality of the death really doesn't set in and reveal its permanence until the doorbell stops ringing, the house is quiet, no more meals are being delivered, the phone rings and text messages have slowed down, the bed is empty, and everyone else has returned to their life as usual. You will still need support during the weeks, months, and even years after your loss, and on many occasions, you might feel alone, isolated, or even forgotten.

Has everyone forgotten about me? Do they remember that I am all alone? So much paperwork to do and no one cares or offers to help me. Wow, am I really a widow? Are my children really fatherless? Oh, to only hear the sound of Mommy again and the cries to go outside and play. Will they invite me to the graduation and give me his diploma in his honor? I no longer have my wife to cook, clean, and care for me. What do I do? When I go back to church, will they look at me funny, make me sad, or ignore me? What does the bank mean that the mortgage is past due? It's the first birthday without him, but no one remembered. It's the one-year anniversary of my baby's death and no one has called to check on me. How dare they not invite me to the family gathering? No one even mentions my son's name anymore. **I don't have the plague.**

I walk into a room full of chatter, laughs, and conversations, and everything stops. It's so quiet you can hear a pin drop. Some look at me and drop their heads. Others turn away. **I don't have the plague.**

It's not our fault that we respond this way. We don't know what to say, and we don't want to upset the grieving individual by bringing up the subject. The truth is that they really do want you to talk about their loved ones. Don't be afraid to share your memorable moments. They want to know that you care, that their loved one mattered to you and impacted your life. They want to hear your stories that maybe they've never heard before. Share your fondest memory, when you first met, how they made you laugh, and the impact they had on your life.

Look at me. Talk to me. I am not invisible. I do not have the plague. Please mention my loved one's name! Can I hear you say his name? Please mention her name. It won't make me sad. It will actually make me smile.

Gloria Vanderbilt's son, Carter, died by suicide at age 23. In a June 2019 People Magazine article, she said, "Some people... who knew Carter will start to talk about him and then say, 'Oh, I'm sorry.' And I say, 'No, I love to talk about him. More, more, more.' Because that brings him alive, and it brings him closer, and it means that he hasn't been forgotten."

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dora Carpenter blends her years of experience working with hundreds of families in the death care industry and her personal experiences with loss and grief to coach, train, and certify grief coaches. She says that grief is not to be fixed or cured but is a necessary part of the experience of transitioning from a place of despair to one of hope.

After being denied by her employer the opportunity to provide grief support to families, she trained as a grief coach and began offering no-cost community grief support at her local libraries. Her mission is to help individuals move from pain to peace, heartbreak to happiness, and grief to gratitude in the shortest time possible.

Coach Dora is a certified professional coach, author, speaker, and former licensed Feel the Fear and Do It Anyway® trainer. As Founder of the Institute of Professional Grief Coaching (IOPGC) and the International Coaching Federation (ICF)-accredited From Grief to Gratitude Coach Certification Program, Dora Carpenter has been recognized as a luminary and pioneer in the grief coach certification movement. She has trained and certified grief coaches in the United States, Canada, Qatar, Cayman Islands, Spain, Brazil, Kuwait, Slovak Republic, Kenya, and Pakistan.

A native Washingtonian, Strayer University graduate, mother, and grandmother, Dora resides in Washington, D.C. Currently practicing retirement, Coach Dora says that her purpose on this earth includes service to others, compassion, and love.

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Want to learn more about grief and make a difference, but not currently interested in becoming a certified grief coach? Interested in conducting discussion groups or workshops based on a topic that no one wants to talk about, but everyone needs to hear? The Grief Talk Revolution Movement might be a good fit for you. Join us in making a difference by educating, advocating, and empowering communities, organizations, educational institutions, healthcare facilities, and more.

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