

The Dumb Things People Say



How Could She Say That?

When Well-Meaning People Say Things That Hurt

Erin Linn, in a wonderful book titled *I Know Just How You Feel: Avoiding the Clichés of Grief* (Pubs Mark, 1986), offers helpful questions for dealing with insensitive remarks from well-meaning people.

What was the person trying to say?

Friends and family are not intentionally cruel. In most cases, they are trying to convey support and comfort.

Why did the comment hurt?

Only by understanding why the comment troubled you can you begin to heal that hurt; most of these comments hurt because they invalidate your grief.

What can we say?

You may never have the opportunity to respond, but just thinking about what you could have said reaffirms a sense of control. You might answer a comment like, "At least you have other children" with a simple "It is a great comfort to have them, but I will always miss Jan." A reply to, "Everything always happens for the best" might be, "I will never understand how the loss of my mother could be for the best." Responses such as these reaffirm your grief and, perhaps in the most favorable situations, teach others how to be more supportive.

Other troubling comments may take the form of unsolicited advice such as "You need to get rid of all his clothes right now" or "You should start dating again." In such situations, it is often helpful to remember two points:

Trust your instincts.

Each person handles loss differently. What worked for someone else may not work for you. While someone advises you to clean out your loved one's closet, you may not be ready to do so yet.

Give yourself time and space.

While it may be important to not become isolated, you might not have the energy to keep up with social activities, much less consider dating again. Most grieving people have noted that there is no need to rush anything that doesn't feel right.

The best support in grief is often the quietest. It need not say much beyond "I am sorry" or "How can I help." Support often manifests in caring actions—the meal that is delivered or the chore that is done without asking. That level of quiet caring is always welcome.

Developed from Journeys with Grief: A Collection of Articles about Love, Life and Loss, edited by Kenneth J. Doka, Ph.D., MDiv., copyright Hospice Foundation of America, 2012.