

What to say when someone dies

For the people around someone who is grieving: what to text, what not to say, what to do instead, and the one message nobody sends at six months.

The short version

- You can't fix it. You don't have to. Showing up is the job.
- Skip "at least" and "everything happens for a reason." Both make the loss smaller than it is.
- Offer something specific, with a date, that's easy to say no to.
- Keep checking in after the first few weeks. That's when it gets quiet, and often when it gets harder.

Why people say the wrong thing

Almost everyone says something clumsy to a grieving person at some point. It usually isn't because they don't care. It's because they're frightened and nobody ever taught them what to say.

Someone else's loss reminds us it could happen to us. "At least" is what a person reaches for when they want to make something smaller because they can't bear how big it is.

The good news: people who care and don't know what to do can learn. That's what this page is for.

What not to say

- "At least he's not suffering."
- "At least you had all those years."
- "At least you're young enough to meet someone else."
- "Everything happens for a reason."
- "He wouldn't want you to be sad."
- "Are you feeling better?"
- Stories about how someone else handled their loss. To the person grieving, these can feel like proof they're doing it wrong.

Some losses are simply bad. You don't have to find the silver lining, and you shouldn't ask them to.

Say less. Mean it.

In the moment

- *"I'm so sorry."*
- *"I don't know what to say, and I'm here."*
- *"I'm thinking of you. You don't have to reply."*
- *"Tell me about them." (Only if you're ready to listen to the answer.)*

Then let there be silence. You don't have to fill it.

What to text

A short text that asks for nothing is a gift. Grieving people are tired, and a message they don't have to answer is one less thing to manage.

- *"Thinking of you today. No need to reply."*
- *"No pressure to answer. I'm around if you want company."*
- *"I'm thinking about them tonight. Thought you might be too."*

What to do instead of "let me know if you need anything"

That offer puts all the work on the person who's grieving. They have to work out what they need, decide whether it's reasonable, and then ask a busy person for it. So almost nobody takes it up.

Make it specific, give it a time, and make it easy to decline:

- *"Can I come by Thursday evening? You don't have to talk. I'll just sit with you."*
- *"Would you like me to come with you to that appointment on the twelfth?"*
- *"Would a walk on Sunday work? We don't have to talk about it."*

Telling someone what kind of company you're offering takes the guesswork out for both of you. If they say no, that's fine. Ask again another time.

The message nobody sends at six months

Support is often intense for about three weeks and then fades. Usually it isn't because people stopped caring. They assumed the person wanted space, or they got busy, or they didn't want to intrude.

Meanwhile month four is often harder than month one.

Send this. Then send another one a few months later.

- *"I know it's been a while. I'm still thinking about them, and about you. No need to reply."*
- *"I've been thinking about [name]. Can I take you to lunch this week?"*
- *"I remembered it's coming up on their birthday. I'm here if you want company that day."*

Hard dates matter

Put the birthday, the anniversary, and the date of the death in your calendar. A message on those days says "I remember," and that is often what the person most wants to hear.

Say their name. It doesn't remind them of their loss. They haven't forgotten. It reminds them that someone else remembers too.

Losses without a funeral count too

Divorce, estrangement, a parent with dementia, a career, a diagnosis: these are real losses, and they usually get less support because nobody sends flowers. If someone you know is going through one, the same rules apply.

If they tell you they're not okay

Listen. Don't advise. Ask what would help. You don't need to fix it or explain it.

If someone you love talks about harming themselves, or says people would be better off without them, take it seriously today.

Call or text 988 (free, 24/7, anywhere in the US), or **text HOME to 741741**. If they are in immediate danger, call **911**.

You can call 988 for yourself, too, if you're worried about someone.

Living After Loss is an eight-week grief coaching program with practical tools, for people who are functioning, exhausted, and quietly falling apart. This guide is free to share with anyone who might need it.