

Words Fail Me:

What to Write to the Grieving

When a loved one or friend dies, we often find ourselves at a loss for the exact words to write or say to the bereaved family. “Sorry” seems contrite and empty, even though we truly *are* sorry they are suffering this grief. Finding the words that mirror your heart might come easier if you consider the following:

Your Relationship with the Bereaved

What is your relationship to the person who is suffering loss? Your association with him or her will determine how personal you will want to be.

- For acquaintances (your doctor, co-worker, neighbor, or others who are not in your close circle, you could say something like: *Although I do not know the depth of your pain, I hurt with you and for you. You are in my thoughts and prayers.*

Though your words will not erase their pain, grieving people are comforted in knowing other people are mindful of their grief. Notes and cards from individuals who are not family or close friends help to create a sense of true community. Everyone likes to be remembered.

- For close friends and family you could say - *My heart is saddened at the loss of (insert their name). I cannot begin to imagine the pain you are experiencing but know my deepest sympathies are with you. I'm here if you need a shoulder to cry on.*

If you have experienced a personal loss similar to the one you are acknowledging, rely on expressing the ache you felt. You could say- *I know your heart feels as though it's being crushed with a thousand pounds of bricks, but please know I am here for you. Grief is a journey, and if you'll let me, I'll help you travel that painful path.*

Of course, you don't want to offer a promise you cannot keep. Know the limits of what you are able to offer and give emotionally. It's easy to be swept away by emotions when we feel deeply for someone's loss. Promise only what you know you can deliver.

Your Relationship to the Deceased

In writing your card of sympathy, consider the person who has passed away. What do you know about the deceased individual? What did he or she mean to you? Sharing a few words about the person's character is uplifting—both for you and for the bereaved. For example:

- Share a funny experience you had with the bereaved or something he or she did that made you laugh. *Your father had a great sense of humor. He always made me laugh. I will miss him too. I remember that time he . . .*
- Share how he or she personally touched your life. *I remember when I needed a job and your sister put in a good word for me with her boss. She was a lifesaver. Her caring and compassion for others will live in my heart always.*
- Share something you witnessed the deceased doing that remains strong in your memory or influenced your life. *I remember the Thanksgiving when a family up the street had nothing to eat. Your mother gave out of her own pantry. She showed me by her example how to give with an open heart.*
- Write something about the deceased's character. *Your brother certainly loved the people he worked with at the Home for Disabled. He demonstrated it in the way he treated them like real people. Jack will be missed, and there will be an empty spot in all our hearts.*

Finding the right words to write in times of loss is never easy. You want your words to convey your deepest sympathies, love, and concern for the bereaved. As you construct your note, be sincere, honest, warm, empathic, and most of all, real. You cannot go wrong. Just a simple "I'm here for you," might be all they need to hear.

The Religious Faith of the Bereaved

Does the bereaved have a religious faith? If so, it is acceptable to reference his or her belief in God or a Higher Power. You don't have to worry about knowing exactly what they believe. Just keep it straightforward.

- For acquaintances, you might express your thoughts in a prayer-like fashion. *May your God give you comfort and peace during this sorrowful occasion. My thoughts are with you and your loved ones.*
- For close individuals who practice a faith. *I know you lean on your faith; so I hope you will receive comfort, peace, and strength through your beliefs in this difficult time. It's never easy to say good-bye to those we love."*

Simply referring to the beliefs of the bereaved shows you have taken the time to consider what is important to them. And that means a great deal to an individual who is grieving.

If you and the bereaved are of the same faith, write a scripture of hope or encouragement along with a personal sentiment. You could say: *Though you grieve your loss, and my heart grieves with you, it's my prayer that in the weeks and months to follow you will rejoice in knowing that "Christ [is] in you," who is "the hope of glory," (Col. 1:27). May our Lord's comfort surround you today and in the days to come.*

A Word of Caution:

When people are grieving, you will want to avoid statements like:

- This must be God's will.
- Everything happens for a reason.
- Don't be sad, your loved one is in heaven.
- "And we know that in all things God works for the good . . ." (Romans 8:28) and other often and perhaps overused scriptures. While they may be true, they do little to comfort the hurting.

Now Write that Note!

Trust your heart as you write or speak those genuine words of sympathy. Think about your relationship to the bereaved and the deceased. Reflect on the deceased person's character, personality, and what he or she meant to you. And incorporate what you know about the bereaved person's faith and beliefs, if applicable. Your heart may feel sad, but your words don't have to fail you.

--Diane Ramirez

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