

# *What do we say when we don't know what to say?*



**A sympathetic ear is often the best way to support someone during a difficult time.**

Talking with someone who is mourning or dealing with a problematic health diagnosis can sometimes be tricky to navigate. Being prepared with a few of these phrases can provide some structure to a difficult conversation.



You arrive at a memorial service and can't speak. You show up for someone facing a hard diagnosis and make it about you. Or you avoid a suffering friend because you don't know what to say.

## **Here are positive statements for any difficult situation.**

*"I'm so sorry."*

Say it slowly, with meaning. Sometimes a hug or squeeze of the hand is acceptable. Adding to I'm sorry, with "...you're going through this", "...for your loss" or "...this happened" is fine. But you don't have to. "I'm so sorry" is one of the sweetest, simplest, most comforting phrases all by itself.

*"May their memory be a blessing."*

Mourning any kind of loss hurts. Sometimes that pain lasts a while and feels overwhelming. The hope we have is that one day, their memory will bring more smiles than tears.

*"This cannot be easy."*

We all have an urge to show that we relate to others' suffering. But telling people about something similar that happened to you doesn't help. Instead, mirror the person who suffers. They don't feel alone when we validate them by nodding along and holding space for them without inserting personal anecdotes.

*"Would it help to talk about it?"*

Some folks want to talk, while others keep details to themselves. Offer to listen without any attachment to their response. If they want to talk, then listen. If they don't want to talk, don't take it personally.

*"You're in my thoughts."*

A periodic text, phone call, or email with these four simple words can make even the darkest days a little brighter. It also invites a conversation without demanding it.



*“What would be most helpful to you right now?”*

Show genuine concern when asking this. Declining your help is easier for them if you phrase it as a question rather than a statement. It also makes it easier to accept help.

*“I don’t know what to say.”*

Admitting you don’t know what to say is perfectly acceptable and understandable. We all know what that feels like. It’s also refreshingly honest. Sit quietly with them until or if they feel like talking. There is a peaceful and healing quality in silence.

## **What not to say:**

*“I know how you feel.”*

*“You’ll get over this.”*

*“I want to feel helpful.”*

*“That which does not kill us makes us stronger.”*

*“I went through something like this.”*

*“Here’s what I would do.”*

*“Everything happens for a reason.”*

*“People have been through worse.”*

*“You’ll be fine.”*

*“Shhhh, don’t cry.”*

*“He/She wouldn’t want you to be sad.”*

*“God only gives us what we can handle.”*

*“You’ve got to get over this and be strong.”*

When we don’t know what to say, sometimes the best thing to do is to stop talking and listen.

## How can CJE SeniorLife help?

We can refer you to the following CJE Senior Life supportive resources:

**CJE Benefits Services**—We are available to help you identify and apply for a broad range of benefits and supportive services available to older adults. Benefits Specialists are SHIP certified to provide guidance on Medicare.

**CJE Care Management Services**—We make assessments, develop Care Plans and refer clients to appropriate services. We work collaboratively with physicians, coordinate home care, guide families and find practical resources that support independence.

**CJE Counseling Services**— Our Licensed Clinical Social Workers are specialists in the field of mental health services for seniors. We offer individual, family and group psychotherapy, as well as support groups.

**CJE Goldberg Legal Services**—Our staff provide free legal consultation, advice, referrals, and drafting legal documents for older adults and those caring for older adults.

**Catherine Durkin Robinson**—is a Jewish death doula. She graduated from the University of Vermont's End-of-Life Doula program and belongs to National End-of-Life Doula Alliance. She was also a longtime hospice-trained volunteer and registered pre-need counselor. [www.anityadoulaservices.org](http://www.anityadoulaservices.org)

**To find out more about our many services and programs, call CJE SeniorLife at 773.508.1000.**

THE CJE ADVANTAGE: Since 1972, CJE SeniorLife has been a central resource and champion for older adults and their families by providing community-based and residential care options. We provide solutions that enhance their quality of life while honoring their unique healthcare, lifestyle and socio-economic needs.

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CJE SeniorLife® is a partner with the Jewish United Fund in serving our community.

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