



Fact sheet 22

I don't know what to do, I don't know what to say

'My biggest problem was that I just didn't know what to say to them. In the end, I decided not to say anything. Much later I realised that I had probably caused them even more grief – not saying anything was probably the worst thing I could have done.' (Anonymous)

This fact sheet provides information on how to support and assist someone experiencing a stressful or traumatic life event.

The importance of responding to someone who is facing a crisis

The tragedies of life can often leave people speechless. How do we best respond to a friend or colleague who is experiencing the devastating effects of a sudden unexpected death, a terminal illness, financial loss or a relationship breakdown?

People respond differently to stressful events; some may feel that their trust in the world and in others has been betrayed or feel helpless, threatened, vulnerable, cheated or disbelieving about what is happening to them. To rebuild trust, they need more, not less, support from family and friends. They need to know that they are not alone, that the world has not turned against them, and that they have the support and the security they need to cope with life's challenges.

When friends and colleagues ignore or are unable to respond helpfully to someone who is having a stressful time, it can often make the situation worse.



How to support someone having a really tough time

- Say something, no matter how clumsy you may feel. If you are stuck for words, ask the person how they are feeling or even tell them 'I don't know what to say'. Don't be afraid of showing your own emotions. Remember that if you say nothing, the person may see this as rejection. Crisis and loss are very isolating – if you stay away you may well increase the person's pain and sense of loss.
- Respond carefully and thoughtfully. Don't be dismissive or flippant and be sensitive to how the person is feeling.
- Be patient – understand that everyone responds to life events in their own way and their own time. Don't try to rush someone back into their normal routine before they are ready or make someone feel guilty if they seem to be coping better than you think they should. Often the best thing you can do is listen, quietly, carefully and sympathetically, without making any judgements.
- Be sincere, accepting, supportive and loving.
- Be open and honest. Let them know that you want to be there for them.
- Offer to help with practical tasks. This can give the person a chance to get other important tasks done, spend some time dealing with their situation or give them much needed time-out. Accept that your offers of help may be refused; sometimes people find it difficult to accept support or don't want to admit that they might need help.
- Be there to listen and provide support. Let the person know that you are available to help in whatever way they need.
- Offer accurate and helpful information and resources. Often people don't know where to find the best support and information for their particular situation. If you don't know how to help, ask people who do know; go to your local health centre or doctor. Offer the information and resources as options only – don't attempt to solve their problems for them.
- Try to be supportive during especially difficult times for the person such as anniversaries, birthdays, or holidays.
- Encourage the person to seek help from other sources, such as family members, friends, their local doctor, other health professionals, support groups or community organisations. Offer to go with them if this would help.
- When assisting children or teenagers, be honest and supportive. Children and teenagers may react differently to situations than adults do. Don't judge a young person's problems as insignificant or ignore the situation and hope they'll 'get over it'. Talk to them about their situation and offer to help them find good solutions and ways to cope.
- Take care of yourself – helping someone to cope with trauma and stress can be exhausting and draining. Find some time for the things you enjoy and enlist others who can help you to support the person in need.

More information

- Australian Psychological Society – Coping With Traumatic Events available at www.psychology.org.au
- beyondblue - Practical Ways to Help Someone With Depression available at www.beyondblue.org.au; Ph: 1300 22 4636.
- Buckman R (1992). *I Don't Know What to Say...: How to Help and Support Someone Who is Dying*. Vintage Books: New York.
- HealthInsite – Coping in a Crisis: www.healthinsite.gov.au
- Healthy Place – If You Know Someone Who's Depressed: www.healthyplace.com
- Kaplan RM (2004). *How to Say It When You Don't Know What to Say: The Right Words for Difficult Times*. Prentice Hall Press: New York.
- SANE Australia – Is someone close to you bereaved by suicide? www.sane.org