When I ask you to listen to me
and you start to give me advice,

You have not done what I asked.

When I ask you to listen to me
and you say I shouldn’t feel that way,

You are trampling on my feelings

When I ask you to listen to me
and you feel you have to solve my problems,

You have failed me, strange as that may seem

So please just listen and hear me

And if you want to talk,
wait a moment for your turn –

I promise I’ll listen to you
WHAT TO SAY? – HOW TO COMFORT?

Effective communication with persons who are or have been experiencing some type of crisis or loss does not require that you, yourself, have experienced a similar loss. It is, however, helpful to have a measure of understanding about common responses to grief and loss.

GRIEF

A normal human response to a significant loss

Whatever the event, their world has permanently altered by it.

KUBLER-ROSS STAGES OF GRIEF

Denial. A state of shock and/or disbelief. The reality may not have been completely absorbed at this time. Prevents emotional overload.

Anger. Useful way of releasing adrenalin. For some, anger is a way to avoid feeling the underlying fear and helplessness.

Bargaining. “If only….” Seeking answers that may not exist, seeking some sense of control over an uncontrollable event.

Depression. Pulling inside to heal. An important part of the process. Does not necessarily have to be “fixed”.

Acceptance. Withdrawing emotional energy from the loss and investing it in the here and now. Establishing a new “normal”.

BARRIERS TO COMMUNICATION

Personal discomfort:
There but for the grace of God…
Memory of a personal loss

Faulty assumptions:
“he/she probably wants to be left alone”.
“It is too soon…..”
“I’ll make him/her cry”
“They are too young to understand” (children)

Fears.
Fear of saying the wrong thing
Fear of emotions – your own or theirs
Feeling helpless

GENERAL GUIDELINES

Personal awareness – Begin with yourself: What are your own values and attitudes and beliefs? How is your comfort level? Have you found a sense of peace about your own life and death?

Being there - Remember that your caring and your willingness to be present is of far greater importance than what you say.

Initiate contact: Do reach out and make contact. Don’t make assumptions about what someone else needs or wants – check it out!

Listen, Listen, Listen.

Avoid euphemisms and platitudes – they are generally more helpful to the people who express them than those who receive them. Don’t use them as a shield.
Do sit down. Standing while offering support gives the impression that you are either uncomfortable or in a hurry.

Make eye contact

Be aware of your body language.

Offer information if it seems appropriate. Preface your offer with: ”Would it be helpful for you to......”

Don’t be afraid of tears – yours or theirs.

Silences are OK

Do not make comparisons. It is not helpful to most people in distress to be told that others may be worse off. The underlying message of such comments is: ”you don’t have a right to feel the way you do”.

Pity parties are OK.

Acknowledge your own helplessness. It is OK to say: ‘I don’t know”, “I don’t know what to say”, “I wish I could make this easier for you”.

Ask permission and offer a hug. Touch is a powerful communication tool.
WHERE DOES FAITH FIT IN?

**Spiritual needs:** Spiritual needs can vary depending on circumstances and may vary greatly with each individual.

**Finding peace:** The ultimate spiritual goal of those nearing the end of life. May not always happen through traditional pathways.

**Meeting people where they are:** Even though a person may be deeply religious, they may not always be in a place of faith. Many dealing with tragedies of varying kinds may question God.

**Praying - Ask permission:** Many people, whether of faith or not, will welcome prayers. Do not, however, assume this is so. Simply ask.

**Remember:** Whether invoked or not, God is there!

CRISIS INTERVENTION

**FACTS:** This is the least threatening avenue for opening communication with a person in crisis. When did they first become aware? What were the circumstances? Was this a complete shock? Who broke the news? Etc.

**THOUGHTS:** After the person starts to talk and relax a little bit, this is the next step. What was their first thought? What was the primary concern? Was it as bad as they thought?

**FEELINGS:** A non-threatening way to approach feelings and encourage a person to talk is to make guesses about feelings. “That must have been scary”. “You look sad”. “That would have made me feel... (angry, confused, upset, etc.)”.

HOW DO YOU GET BETTER AT THIS?

Communication is not rocket science. It is a skill that requires some time on your part. It can be learned in a series of 10-minute sessions.

1. Carry a notepad or 3x5 filing card in your pocket.
2. Whenever a situation occurs that leaves you wondering if that was the best thing to say – write the exchange down.
3. When you have a few minutes or a break, take out your notes and write down (don’t just think them) 5 other ways you could have responded.
4. Rate you responses from best to worst.
5. If you do this consistently for 30 days you will start noticing a difference in how you tune in to people and your responses will come to you more easily.
6. Remember: any new skill feels awkward at first!

PRACTICE GROUPS

You are visiting with a friend whose husband has been receiving treatment for cancer several years. His treatment is not containing the cancer and she says “he just seems to be giving up….”