

What to say to grieving families



“I’m so sorry.”

*Recognize the loss. Be sincere in what you say.
Express that you truly care.*

“What can I do for you?”

Don’t avoid the bereaved because of your own discomfort. Don’t attempt to answer questions if you don’t have the answers.

“Are there others you want near?”

Ask about other family members. Ask whether they have any special requests.

“What do you remember most?”

Guide family members to share memories and tell stories.

“Tell me what you’re feeling.”

*Don’t say things like “I understand how you feel” or “Death was a blessing.”
Truly listen to what is being said.*

“How long were you together?”

Sometimes, the best thing you can do is to not talk at all. Just listen to the stories the family wants to share.

“Tell me about _____. What was he/she like as a _____?”

“I’m sad for you.”

Encouraged the bereaved to be patient with themselves. Remind them (and yourself) that crying is healing.

“Do you feel like talking?”

Don’t dominate the conversation, change the subject, pass judgment or give advice.

“Tell me what you’re thinking.”

Be aware of body language (yours and theirs). Lean in toward the person speaking. Look them in the eye and truly “hear” what they are saying.

“I’m here for you. I’m here to listen.”

Use “active” listening. This allows you to make yourself fully present. Do not think about what to say next; just listen and be present.

“Would you like some time alone, or would you like me to stay a while longer?”

Sometimes, family members want company. Other times, they want to be alone. Asking this question in this way allows them to answer however they choose without feeling judgment.

“Take all the time you need.”

Remember to listen more than you talk. Allow for silence. Let them tell their stories.

This message is brought to you by the Sacred Transitions team at Christian Health Care Center in Lynden. Our overarching goal is to have a specially trained volunteer sitting with each resident or patient during their final hours to ensure that no one dies alone, except by choice, and that everyone’s death is a sacred transition filled with grace. It is a privilege to get to serve them at this precious time. For more information on the Sacred Transitions program at CHCC, please contact us.