

Holiday blues: Four mistakes we make when comforting friends who are struggling

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If you have a loved one who's suffering, "Happy holidays!" can feel like a cruel joke. The most wonderful time of the year? Not for everyone.



(Photo: Martin E. Klimek, USA TODAY)

We've all been there: Someone we know is suffering, and we're not sure what to do. In [Hilary Weisfeld \(https://optionb.org/stories/showing-up-by-nvo6c8w\)](https://optionb.org/stories/showing-up-by-nvo6c8w)'s case, her daughter's teacher had a 4-year-old girl with leukemia who was admitted to the hospital. They weren't close friends; Hilary had never met the little girl.

Hilary went to a toy store, bought a stuffed animal, and sent an email: "I'm coming to the hospital with a package for your daughter. I don't want to invade your privacy or hers. If you don't feel like coming down I'll leave it at the front desk. No pressure." The teacher replied immediately, inviting her up. As the girl unwrapped her new toy, the teacher thanked Hilary with tears in her eyes.

Although we all want to support others through hardship, knowing how to do that isn't always intuitive. Every bookstore has a self-help section — but sometimes what we really need is a "help others" section.

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The holidays are supposed to be a time of celebration — but if you're dealing with illness, divorce, incarceration or grief, that festive spirit can feel like salt being poured on a wound. Holidays can make you painfully aware of the love, liberty or life you've lost.

If you have a loved one who's suffering, phrases you've used a thousand times without a second thought — "Happy holidays! Season's greetings!" — can feel like a cruel joke. The most wonderful time of the year? Not for everyone.

Many people are afraid to acknowledge others' pain: They don't want to bring it up. Only after Sheryl's husband Dave died suddenly did we realize how ridiculous that is. You can't remind her Dave is gone. She's aware of that every day.

The elephant is always there. The best thing you can do is speak up instead of saying silent. But knowing what to say can be as hard as finding the courage to say something. For most of our lives, we've made four big mistakes.

First: When someone is in anguish, our instinct is to encourage them to think positive. "Time heals all wounds!" "Everything happens for a reason." But after interviewing people who lost a spouse or child, psychologists found that the most unhelpful "help" came from those who urged them to cheer up and recover. Pressuring people to be happy is a surefire way to make them sad; feeling bad about feeling bad just makes us feel worse.

For bereaved parents and spouses, the most helpful help came from people who invited them to express their feelings. At [The Dinner Party \(http://thedinnerparty.org/\)](http://thedinnerparty.org/), young people who have lost spouses host an annual "All Feelings Welcome" potluck. As therapist Megan Devine says, "[Some things cannot be fixed \(http://www.refugeingrief.com\)](http://www.refugeingrief.com). They can only be carried."

Second: We've tried to empathize by mentioning something similar we've encountered. Your brother is sick from chemo? I totally know how you feel — my cat was throwing up recently. Sociologists call this conversational narcissism: that moment when we shift the conversation to put ourselves in the spotlight. Odds are you don't actually know how they feel. Even if you do, you should focus on their experience, not yours.

“When you’re faced with tragedy,” writer Tim Lawrence notes, “the most powerful thing you can do is acknowledge. Literally say the words: I acknowledge your pain (<http://www.timjlawrence.com/blog/2015/10/19/everything-doesnt-happen-for-a-reason>). I’m here with you.”

Third: We’ve tried to help by offering advice. That turns out to be the other most unhelpful form of help. Go to the gym — sure, I’ll sweat off the grief! Come to the holiday party — yep, drinking eggnog will help me win custody of my kids.

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We have some unsolicited advice: Don’t give unsolicited advice. Consider just admitting, “I wish I knew the right thing to say. I’m so sorry you’re going through this — but you will not go through it alone.”

And fourth: We’ve tried to show support by saying, “Let me know if there’s anything I can do.” We meant it, but it put the burden on others to know what they needed and feel comfortable asking. “Instead of offering ‘anything,’ ” author Bruce Feiler recommends, “just do something (<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/02/08/style/how-to-be-a-friend-in-deed.html>).” Invite them over for a holiday dinner. Make a playlist of songs that aren’t about joy or snow. Drop off a home-cooked meal. As Hilary Weisfeld learned, you don’t have to be best friends since third grade to show up.

Hilary didn’t stop at visiting her daughter’s teacher in the hospital. She reached out later that week with another specific offer: “I think you need a delivery of really terrible magazines. Any preferences? If not, I’ll just go rogue.”

“You have no idea how much your checking in has meant to us,” her daughter’s teacher replied.

When you’re at a loss for words, the best thing you can do is spring into action. Actions don’t just speak louder than words — they’re felt more deeply, too.

Sheryl Sandberg and Adam Grant are the authors of Option B: Facing Adversity, Building Resilience, and Finding Joy (<https://www.amazon.com/Option-Adversity-Building-Resilience-Finding/dp/1524732680>). To learn more about #OptionBThere for the holidays, visit optionb.org/holidays (<https://optionb.org/>)

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