

## The right things to say when consoling the bereaved

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Four years ago, my mother died unexpectedly. With her going, I lost one of my best friends, my mom and my home.

In the ravages of grief that followed, too many people trotted out the overworked phrase "time will heal you."

If you tell somebody that "time will heal them," you are unintentionally demonstrating your ignorance of the pain engendered by deep loss.

Time didn't heal me. For the first six months, I was in a daze. Only the compassion of my boss, husband, family and friends provided the crutches I desperately needed to endure. Months passed before I stopped existing day to day; it was a year before I looked out beyond a week into my future. It hurt too much.

Since then, I've spoken with many others who have lost people they dearly loved. And we all came to the same conclusion: You don't "heal" from such a loss. Instead, you learn to cope.

Coping means adjusting to the empty spot in your heart, and learning to live with it. If you don't learn to cope, you cannot proceed with your life.

You can usually recognize those who have experienced such life-altering grief. These individuals offer sympathy, and words that acknowledge your suffering; even the simple gesture of a touch on the arm, or an invitation to talk. They do not seek to change the subject; they listen. They can judge if the time is right to share their own experiences with the hope that they will shed light in a time of emotional darkness.

I call it compassion from the heart.

People who have not encountered such pain tend to get an uncomfortable, even impatient expression. They advise how you "should" be feeling and how soon you "should expect to get over it." As if they know.

And if they feel enough time has elapsed, they say, "Get on with your life." Perhaps they are afraid of confronting their own inevitable mortality. I must believe they have no realization of

the hurt they cause with such callous behavior.

Each person learns to cope at his or her own speed. There is no set schedule -- it is as individual as a thumbprint. But with support, patience and compassion, the ability to cope does emerge.

On my desk sits the last picture I ever took of my mom. She has a big smile, waving goodbye as she boards the train that would take her home to New York. It somehow captured the essence of everything she was -- determined, cheerful, sprightly -- someone who never gave up even when she had plenty of reasons to. I like to tell people about her, of the challenges she faced, the things she accomplished. And in doing so, I celebrate her life. In my heart, my mom is still alive.

So when I hear others grieving, I invite them to tell me about it. I empathize with their sorrow. And I hope that maybe that talk will help them cope a little better that day, and allow them to move one step farther down the path.

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*Posted on 03/05/04 06:25:13*

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