

## HOW TO TALK (AND NOT TO TALK) TO A BEREAVED CO-WORKER



It's unfortunate, but part of life -- at some point, someone at your workplace will lose a loved one or close friend.

People never seem to know how to treat a bereaved person, or how to talk to them. Keeping in mind the office environment and professional relationships, here are some tips. **What Not to Say** **God has a purpose / It's God's will.** Very common, and totally inappropriate both at work or not. No one wants to hear that their loved one's death was plotted by deities. And at work, it's best to never bring up religion. Let your bereaved co-worker work out any religious issues, if any, with their clergy. **I know how you feel.** Unless you suffered the exact same loss -- a parent, a child, whatever -- then do not say this, because you *don't* know how they feel. And even if you have had a similar experience, you're just a co-worker -- an acquaintance. Unless you and the grieving person are close friends outside of work, don't try to share your experience. **You'll get over it.** Absolutely true. And NO ONE wants to hear it when the pain is so fresh. **You have to get on with your life.** Also true. But maybe the bereaved person could worry about that *after* the funeral? **What Not to Do** **Pretend nothing happened.** Even if you don't know a work acquaintance very well, just say "I'm sorry." Ignoring the issue doesn't make it go away -- it can actually increase the discomfort. Once the issue has been briefly touched upon, don't mention it again. And treat the bereaved person as you normally would -- don't offer to take some of their work, for example. Leave that between the bereaved person and their immediate supervisor. **Compare their losses to your losses.** *You think it's bad to lose a nephew? I lost a son!* Wow, I feel bad for you. And you're a monster -- how dare you belittle someone's suffering? It doesn't matter if you lost ten children. STFU. **Offer your philosophy on death.** Keep it to yourself. Let the bereaved's family and clergy deal with that. No one cares what you learned on your junior year trip to Nepal. Okay, if those are the things to not do or say, what should one do or say? **What to Say** **I'm sorry.** Expresses empathy and caring, without crossing any lines. They say "thank you," and you can all get back to work. **What to Do** **Offer help.** It's almost a cliché, and such help is rarely accepted. But "If there is anything I can do to help, please let me know" will be appreciated, even if it never comes up again. BUT -- if the bereaved takes you up on your offer, then you really have to help. **Ask about, or offer memories about, the deceased.** If you have never met the person who died, you can ask the bereaved person to talk about him or her. If they decline the offer, it's still appreciated. If they talk about the loved one, then be attentive. If you knew the deceased person, then feel free to mention a quick memory of that person, or say something nice. *I met your husband at last year's Christmas party, and we talked for a while. He was a fascinating person.* **Let things get back to normal on the bereaved's own schedule.** Don't avoid the person, or seek them out. Treat them respectfully, and professionally. One day soon, he or she will laugh at a joke, or thank you for your understanding, and any social discomfort will lift. Do you have any advice for handling these touchy office situations? Let us know in the [comments](#)!