

"We can count on Francesca to generously offer insightful, practical guides that inspire compassion and honor the true nature of grief."
—Wilka Roig, death educator and activist



Kindred Grief Care

Guidance for Reaching Out,
Showing Up, and Supporting Loss

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Foreword by Caren Martineau of Beival

Meaningful Messaging

From *Kindred Grief Care*

By Francesca Lynn Arnoldy

Meaningful Messaging



Although we're likely to do more listening than speaking when providing grief care, it's important to be aware of common messaging. In our effort to normalize the various ways loss manifests, we'll disrupt some myths and platitudes, and avoid the lure of offering false reassurances.

Let's examine some popular sentiments in more detail.

Misguided Myths

- "Time heals all wounds."

Grieving people frequently hear this. It's meant to be comforting—and might be for some mourners, sometimes—but as a "blanket statement," it's not reliably effective. It bypasses any acute pain a bereft person is experiencing, which ought to be the focus. Plus, this statement is misleading, as time alone does not heal emotional wounds. Time gradually enables the process of grieving and re-acclimation to happen. Healing involves cycling between leaning into loss, leaning into life, and resting.

- "You'll get over it."

Getting "over" a loss is not the goal; learning to somehow live with it is. At first, profound grief is loud and intense. It can be all-consuming, leaving very little space for anything else, as it infiltrates all aspects of a person's being. Gradually, the grief starts to quiet down at moments, allowing the mourner a chance to focus on what's next. There is never a completion or "graduation" to expect. Instead, it's as though the bereaved person must negotiate a new contract with life as an unclear pathway develops into view, one step at a time.

- "Don't move on too fast."

While returning to life is part of the healing process, immediately jumping into a new relationship or hobby in an attempt to evade grief often fails. Any feelings or reactions that have been disregarded or numbed tend to return, perhaps in emotional or physical form. And it's not uncommon for a fresh loss to bring back unexamined ones from the past.

Avoidance can be difficult to witness as *grief care kindred*, but it's not our place to instruct others how to process an ending. Even though we recognize the necessity of traveling the journey completely, sometimes we're merely planting seeds to foster contemplation. In cases like these, you might voice encouraging sentiments like: "As long as you're working through this loss and seeking what you need, you're grieving. Everyone heals in their own way and in their own time."

- “This is a time of great sadness.”

Although significant loss can create despair, mourners might also experience hints of hopefulness. Humans are complex beings capable of complex emotions. People can simultaneously experience heartbreak and happiness, yet they sometimes feel shame for enjoying anything while grieving. It can feel like an act of disloyalty. There might be pressure from others to respond or behave in a certain way while bereaved, or merely a perception of that expectation. A mourner might also grapple with survivor’s guilt for their continued living.

In her book, *Me After You*, psychotherapist Gigi Veasey offers this wisdom: “Do not get confused by thinking that holding on tight to the pain of grief is a way to hold on to [your] person.”¹ The amount of suffering a mourner endures is not evidence of how much they cared for the deceased. Finding new purpose, connection, and even joy after an ending is not a betrayal. Continuing to live—and even thrive—does not diminish what once existed.

- “Everything happens for a reason.”

This may or may not ring true for the bereaved. It depends on a person’s interpretation of the loss and their belief in the meaning of life. Grief care kindred do not provide false reassurance, and it is never our place to explain why an ending has occurred. We do not assign meaning to someone else’s experience.

Be extra mindful of this because people deep in grief are often desperate to answer the perplexing equation of loss. They yearn to make some sense of what happened and to find out *why*. They’re grabbing at meaning to ease their pain. As unbearable as this can be to witness, our role is to be present and compassionate, and to validate their experience. We might respond with supportive silence while allowing the mourner to share. We can also explain the universality of this distress by responding: “It’s so hard to understand a loss like this. It’s completely natural to want answers right now.”

- “Don’t fixate on it.”

Mourners are commonly alarmed at how consumed they are by thoughts of loss. Grief can seem like it’s completely taking over their minds. Cognitive scientist and author Scott Barry Kaufman explains that rumination is a sign of “working hard to make sense of what happened...and creating new structures of meaning and identity.”² He goes on to say that while rumination begins as automatic, intrusive, and repetitive, over time such thinking often becomes more organized, controlled, and deliberate.

It is actually quite normal to fixate on an impactful event because our brains require a system update to adjust to a new map of reality. Neuroscientist and author of the book *The Grieving Brain*, Mary-Frances O’Connor, describes grieving as a type of ongoing learning because it “takes time, can be frustrating, and never really ends.”³ This is why many mourners feel like their person or pet will come through the doorway at any moment. Their minds have been programmed to expect it. O’Connor explains that it’s not enough for mourners to *know* that a significant loss has occurred; they must establish new thought patterns through living.

Of course, if rumination overtakes someone’s ability to function, it’s a sign that additional care might be warranted, such as counseling or joining a support group. For many mourners, simply knowing about this process of rewiring can help them better understand their experience and have more patience. In our role, we can gently share this kind of information to increase grief literacy.

The above “misguided messages” are largely ineffective, so why are they used so often? Mainly, it’s a result of social conditioning. Yet when people repeat these sayings, it’s not only because the phrases are ingrained, but also due to the worry we feel when witnessing another person’s suffering. We want the mourner to get better—to *reach the other side* and be okay again. We want their pain to end. This is rooted in kind sympathy, yet it bypasses the truth that individuals must actually *grieve* in order to heal.

During a visit, a mourner might talk about some condolences they've received, which can sometimes be more upsetting than reassuring. As grief care kindred, we can explain that even with the best intentions, people don't always realize how their words will land. They want to provide solace but sometimes fail to consider the situation through the eyes of the person grieving. You can share these empowering statements to reduce any harm caused.

- Grieving people don't need to believe or agree with every message offered. They can determine what resonates and what does not.
- Grieving people have the right to say that a certain statement doesn't apply to their loss if they feel comfortable responding truthfully.
- Grieving people aren't obligated to teach others how to communicate condolences more appropriately. Their priority is their own healing, not education and advocacy.

Open-Hearted Offerings

Now we're going to review examples of phrases and ideas that tend to be effective. First, ponder them for yourself. Would they have applied to your past heartbreaks? Then, the next step is to decide what to share while offering care. Remember, we do not decipher endings for anyone else. Instead, we offer potential ways to ponder and process loss, remembering that exercising agency while grieving is important.

- Unspoken Words

If a mourner says they wish they'd said or done something differently before their loved one died, it could be an opening for cathartic release. As grief care kindred, we can ask if they want to explore it more: "I know it's not the same as actually having your person back, but if you could have five more minutes/one more day together, what would you say or do?"

If the mourner doesn't want to share the answer aloud, invite them to write a letter instead, which could include sadness, yearning, love, and/or gratitude. They might also add notable (or even mundane) events since their last interaction. They can ceremonially burn or bury their writing or continue adding entries. It's never too late to express unspoken words. Let them know these practices can help lighten some of the heaviness of grief.

- Continuing Bonds

Connection does not necessarily end with death. In 1996, researchers Dennis Klass, Phyllis Silverman, and Steven Nickman offered a perspective on grief which honors a mourner's tendency to remain connected to deceased loved ones.⁴ As a result of their "Continuing Bonds" theory, *letting go* and *moving on* began to lose their foothold as dominant messages and therapeutic prescriptions. We now know that maintaining an ongoing, evolving relationship with loved ones who have died is adaptive and healthy.

Grieving people can keep their bonds strong in many ways. Some people do so by holding onto or wearing their person's belongings, like a piece of jewelry or clothing. Others preserve daily rhythms, finding comfort in familiar patterns. One participant at a retreat shared her ritual of hugging her husband's favorite chair before going to bed to mirror how they used to say goodnight.

Preparing their person's favorite meal or dessert on their birthday is a common practice. Some families continue to set a place for their person at holiday meals and take a moment to reminisce. A mourner might also visit special places they had enjoyed with their person or travel to destinations they had wanted to see together, treating it like a "bucket list" to complete in their honor.

Many bereaved individuals continue to have conversations with their deceased. And they usually have a good idea about how their loved ones would respond to them, because their voices live on in the mourner's mind. Returning to neuroscientist Mary-Frances O'Connor once again, she imparts, "I find it marvelous and comforting that the brain does this—creates this physical part of 'we' to carry forever... We interpret what we see, how we act, and our capacity to love, because our brain carries [our person] forever."⁵ They are gone, but are also everlasting.

- Conserving Energy

In a thread on Quora about unexpected guidance from a therapist, Kate Scott posted, "Run the dishwasher twice."⁶ This simple, liberating advice has since resonated with millions of readers and continues to echo through the internet. It reflects more than a concrete action step; it's a mindset shift.

After people experience a major loss, they need reserves for grieving. How can they conserve energy when it's in short supply? It's helpful to consider what responsibilities a mourner can relinquish temporarily. If this means running the dishwasher twice to cut back on time rinsing, so be it. If it means pulling clothes straight from the laundry basket instead of folding and putting them away, that works. Encourage those grieving to take good care of themselves, accept help when beneficial, and relax high expectations during this season. Conversely, some people find comfort in completing mindless, familiar tasks like cleaning. Only the bereaved can decide what will drain or sustain their strength.

- Narrowing Circles

Socializing can feel like a monumental effort after a loss. Changes within personal and professional "circles" are common. As a mourner's energy goes toward grieving, less is available for friends, family members, and colleagues. Some relationships can weather the changes, while others fare poorly. Endings can lead mourners to question and assess their connections. This might mean prioritizing quality over quantity and cutting some ties. These additional losses can be unsettling. Yet bereavement is a time to draw near to those who can offer compassionate presence and patience.

- "Opposing" Emotions

Just because a mourner's life has begun to grow around their grief doesn't mean they are happy about it, or that they would choose it if given the chance. Rabbi Harold Kushner describes life after the death of his son with these poignant words:

I am a more sensitive person, a more effective pastor, a more sympathetic counsellor because of Aaron's life and death than I would ever have been without it. And I would give up all of those gains in a second if I could have my son back.

If I could choose, I would forego all of the spiritual growth and depth which has come my way...But I cannot choose.⁷

Explaining this false dichotomy of "opposing" emotions can be affirming as the bereaved attempt to hold heartache and hope as well as grief and gratitude.

- Building a Grief Sanctuary

In the book *Honoring Grief*, author and psychotherapist Alexandra Kennedy suggests building a special "sanctuary" for grieving.⁸ Kennedy describes this space as safe and contained. It might be in a section of a room or part of an outdoor garden. One of my clients had what they called a "mourning corner" for this purpose.

Once a grieving person chooses the location, the next step is to create an arrangement, or "altar," with items that connect them to their loss, such as photos, objects from nature, personal artifacts, or small figurines. Candles (real or flameless) can help foster a more sacred atmosphere. Individuals of any age mourning any kind of loss can design this kind of space for themselves.

Kennedy recommends the bereaved person visit it regularly for limited, uninterrupted periods. That way, they can balance the need for continued living with grieving. They might start by spending ten minutes there, perhaps working up to a half or full hour. Folding it into a daily routine is helpful. Journaling can deepen the experience.

Sanctuary sessions can be an opportunity for a mourner to notice varying emotions, including anxiety, sadness, anger, remorse, numbness, or peacefulness. There's no requirement to change or fix reactions. The goal is to acknowledge them within this refuge, knowing it's for a set amount of time, to help ease the fear of being completely overtaken.

If a mourner faces powerful reminders of the loss during other times of the day, they might try to wait to attend to them more fully within their sanctuary. This practice can be useful for maintaining composure in spaces that don't seem appropriate for an outpouring of emotion. Some people are inundated by their grief constantly, and having a practice like this can gently put limitations on how much time they focus on it. Others feel their grief is stifled and recognize the need to lean into it.

The main point of building an altar is to *be with* loss. As time passes and healing continues, visits might space out. The mourner might rearrange or simplify the layout or even deconstruct the sanctuary, knowing this option remains available to them.

- Creative Grieving

Besides journaling or writing letters, there are many other ways for the bereaved to metabolize and move grief through their system. One option is to express loss through artistic modalities, like drawing, painting, or collaging. Another way to work with grief creatively is by incorporating the natural world. Individuals might build a mandala to represent their loss with fallen leaves, sticks, grass, shells, stones, or flowers. This activity can bring into focus the concept of impermanence, especially if the piece remains outdoors to re-disperse itself.

Types of somatic movement, like dance or yoga, are other creative possibilities to consider, especially when grief feels heavy or stuck. A labyrinth—which is an intricate path with one way in, one way out, and no way to get lost—can be a cathartic and illuminating exercise. There's usually a special place to pause in the center. If mobility or access pose issues, there are printable designs available. People can draw a finger along the lines as an alternative.

Before engaging in these practices, the grieving person can set an intention or hold a certain question in mind. During the act of creating or moving, they can immerse themselves in the moment to let things unfold intuitively and organically. Upon completion, they can take time to absorb any insights uncovered.

- Meaningful Metaphors

Some people make better sense of the world visually. If that's the case, you could try describing grief symbolically to see if it resonates. Here are two options to utilize:

1. The Ball of Yarn

Initially, grief is a knotted-up ball of yarn that's frustratingly impossible to untangle. It's a big mess right in front of your face, blocking the rest of life from view. It's too close to focus on and too big to see past.

As you tug at the threads, it begins to give way. Sometimes you feel like you're making progress. Other times, it's like you've gotten nowhere. All the while, the ball is becoming more familiar in your hands. You're learning how to hold and handle it. Through trial and error, you realize what approaches are more effective and which are futile.

Even once the major knots are released, the yarn sometimes gets snarled again. You begin to realize it's just the nature of the fabric. You gradually accept it with less surprise and annoyance.

Life slowly comes back into view as the once-tight ball becomes a loosened pile. With time, patience, and cautious hope, you might eventually weave the worn-out yarn into something new—a creation with its own shape that bears resemblance to its past form.

2. Transformational Journeys

The butterfly and mythical phoenix undergo incredible transformations as they shift from one mode of being to another. When dissolved into goo within a chrysalis or turned into ashes, these creatures endure a complex process of regeneration. After they re-emerge, built of the same components, they carry the elemental history of their evolution. When a butterfly completes its metamorphosis after relinquishing its old form, it begins again with wings for taking flight. The phoenix, symbolizing hope and resilience, is born anew, reminding us that endings can lead to new beginnings.

We can use these metaphors to build trust in a mourner's strength. We might also gently offer them to others as a means to explore grief. But we would never claim they illustrate anyone's exact story. With any creative approach to grief care, we need to leave room for individual interpretations and preferences.

¹ Gigi Veasey, *Me After You* (Hopes Road Publishing, 2022).

² Scott Barry Kaufman, "Post-Traumatic Growth: Finding Meaning and Creativity in Adversity," *Scott Barry Kaufman*, n.d., scottbarrykaufman.com/post-traumatic-growth-finding-meaning-and-creativity-in-adversity/.

³ Mary-Frances O'Connor, "The Grieving Brain: The Surprising Science of How We Learn from Love and Loss," *Next Big Idea Club Magazine*, March 1, 2022, nextbigideaclub.com/magazine/grieving-brain-surprising-science-learn-love-loss-bookbite/32708/.

⁴ Dennis Klass, Phyllis R. Silverman, and Steven L. Nickman, eds., *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief* (Washington, DC: Taylor & Francis, 1996).

⁵ O'Connor, "The Grieving Brain."

⁶ Kate Scott, "Has a Therapist Ever Told You Something Completely Unexpected?" Quora, n.d., www.quora.com/Has-a-therapist-ever-told-you-something-completely-unexpected/answer/Kate-Scott-6.

⁷ Harold S. Kushner, *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (New York: Schocken Books, 1981).

⁸ Alexandra Kennedy, *Honoring Grief: Creating a Space to Let Yourself Heal* (Oakland, CA: New Harbinger Publications, 2014).

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