

Funerals are tough for everyone.

You want to pay your respects but trying to find the right words can sometimes feel awkward or uncomfortable. In fact, some people get so nervous just thinking about memorials that they avoid the service altogether - but that's not the answer.

How do you convey your feelings without using typical canned responses or sounding too cliché? What topics are off limits or could be considered offensive? What can you do to express your sympathy in an authentic way and let those around you know that you care?

Thankfully, the answer isn't really that difficult. It all boils down to simply listening to what others are saying and responding in a thoughtful, appropriate manner. Here are a few tips to get you started.

BE ORIGINAL

While it feels nice to utter phrases like, *"I'm sorry for your loss"* or *"He was such a good person"* these statements can ring hollow. Especially when repeated from dozens if not hundreds of other people at the same time. If you really want to show you care, add some personalization to your comments.

Put some thought into your words and be original. For instance: *"I wanted to be here today because you are very special to me, and I cared deeply about John. You've both made a huge impact in my life, and I'm extremely grateful for our friendship."*

Specific statements regarding how YOU feel towards them and their loved ones are more powerful and will likely be remembered long after the day is over.

SHOW SOME EMPATHY

Even done with the best of intentions, trying to put ourselves in someone else's shoes is rarely a good idea. Especially not during a time of grief. Saying *"I know how you feel"* or *"I get what you're going through"* implies that we understand what it's like to be them. But that's impossible.

Do you *really* know what it's like to lose a child? Or to suddenly be without your spouse of 40 years? Even if you have gone through something similar, each person's experience is unique and has its own subtleties. As will the way in which they handle it.

Instead, why not ask them how THEY feel? It's okay to share details from your own past (if appropriate), just don't put words in their mouth.

A great way to show empathy is to try and understand what the other person is going through. Not by telling them how to think or feel based on your own experiences.

SHARE STORIES

The whole point of having a funeral in the first place is to remember someone and celebrate their life. And one of the best ways to do this is by sharing stories.

Ask a family member to relate one of their favorite anecdotes about the deceased. You'll likely see their face light up as they recount the warmth and humor of their loved one. Re-living a wonderful memory from the past can be comforting to those who are suffering and can provide a brief, yet welcome distraction from the situation at hand.

If they respond well to your request, ask them to continue on for as long as they want. But if you sense they're done talking, or start to become overwhelmed, back off and give them some space.

You can also share one of your own stories about the departed. Just be sure the focus of what you're saying is more about the other person than it is about you.

OFFER SPECIFIC HELP

One of the most common phrases uttered at a memorial has to be *"Let me know if I can do anything to help."* While this is certainly a noble offer, it usually falls upon deaf ears.

The affected person normally has so much on their mind that it's nearly impossible to think about the future - for the present is hard enough. If you genuinely want to help someone, your offer needs to be specific.

"Jane, don't worry about dinners this week. I'll go to the store tomorrow and cook up a few meals for you to have the next couple of nights." Not only are you solving a problem for them, but you're doing so in a way that requires no extra effort on their part. In this instance, you're also making sure they eat healthy during a stressful time.

Think of other meaningful ways you can help (mowing the lawn, cleaning house, etc.) and then give specifics of how you're going to do it. You're much more likely to have others take you up on the offer when you make all the plans for them.

JUST BE THERE

Lastly, don't worry if you're still unsure of what to say or do at the service...**JUST GO!** The fact that you make the time to be there and show your support means a lot (because some others won't). If you have a chance to greet the family, simply give them a hug and say "*I love you.*"

Sometimes a warm smile, friendly embrace and a kind word are all that it takes to brighten someone's day.