

31 Empathetic Statements for When You Don't Know What to Say ~ Laura Click

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When something terrible happens to a friend or loved one, it can be difficult to know what to say. That's why we often reach for one of these common responses:

"Everything happens for a reason."

"This too shall pass."

"Just look on the bright side..."

"God has a plan."

"I know how you feel."

"He's in a better place now."

"This could be a blessing in disguise."

"Something better is around the corner."

Although these statements sound good in theory, they rarely do much to help the other person feel better. Instead, it often minimizes the other person's pain and does little to connect with how he or she is feeling. I don't believe we do this intentionally. We use these statements because they have been said to us in similar situations. We've become conditioned to believe that these cliché responses are the best things to say when someone is hurting — even if they weren't helpful to us when we were in that same situation. But even if you haven't lost a spouse or have been diagnosed with cancer, you can imagine what it might be like if that had happened to you. That's what empathy looks like — connecting with the other person's pain and trying to understand how he or she might be feeling.

How to Show Empathy

Once you put yourself in the other person's shoes, what do you say? To be honest, showing empathy is a lot more about action than it is about words. When a friend or loved one shares something difficult with you, she is mostly looking for someone to listen. But, if you are someone who struggles with what to say in these situations, the following list may help you find a better response than the ones we typically say.

Examples of Empathetic Responses

1. Acknowledge their pain.

Perhaps the best thing you can do is to acknowledge how the other person feels. When you connect with someone's pain or struggle, it helps him feel supported. It shows you understand (or are trying to understand) how he might be feeling.

People in pain really just want to be heard. They want validation that what they are going through is difficult.

Here are some examples of what this sounds like:

"I'm sorry you are going through this."

"Wow, that really sucks."

"I hate that this happened."

"That must be hard."

"That sounds really challenging."

"I can see how that would be difficult."

2. Share how you feel.

Sometimes, it's okay to simply admit you don't know what to say or that you're having a hard time imagining what it would be like to experience what the other person is going through.

Whatever you do, just make sure you don't diminish the other person's experience or make it all about you. Instead, focus on sharing your feelings to help you better connect with theirs.

Here are some examples of what this could sound like:

"Wow. I don't know what to say."

"I can't imagine what you must be going through."

"I wish I could make it better."

"My heart hurts for you."

"It makes me really sad to hear this happened."

3. Show gratitude that the person opened up.

Many people struggle with vulnerability because they have been burned before. They don't want to share their struggles for fear that they won't receive an empathetic response. I definitely felt that way for a long time.

When someone chooses to open up to you, it shows they really trust you. It's your job to honor that and respond with care.

Let the person know you appreciate her sharing with you and acknowledge that it might have been difficult to do so. When you do this, it signals that you are a safe harbor for vulnerability.

Here's what these responses might sound like:

"Thank you for sharing with me."

"I'm glad you told me."

"Thank you for trusting me with this. That really means a lot."

"This must be hard to talk about. Thanks for opening up to me."

4. Show interest.

Going through difficulties can be terribly isolating and lonely. That's why people share their struggles — they are longing for connection. They want someone to take interest in their story and understand how they are feeling.

The best way to connect with someone is not by talking, but by listening. Show you care by asking questions and showing a genuine interest in what they have to say.

Here's what that sounds like:

"How are you feeling about everything?"

"What has this been like for you?"

"I want to make sure I understand..."

"What I'm hearing is that you are feeling _____. Is that right?"

"Is there anything else you want to share?"

5. Be encouraging.

I believe most people really want to be encouraging when a friend or loved one is going through a tough time.

The problem is that we often show this by trying to "fix" the problem or forcing the person to look on the bright side. And while our intentions are good, this approach is rarely helpful to the person in pain.

That doesn't mean you can't be encouraging. You simply have to be mindful of how you approach it.

Instead of saying, "it will get better" or "here's what I would do," remind her that you love her. Share what you admire about her.

Help her see what you do — that she is an amazing person who is worthy of love.

Here are some examples:

"You are brave / strong / talented."

"You matter."

"You are a warrior."

"I'm in your corner."

"I love you."

"I'm proud of you."

6. Be supportive.

When it comes to empathy, actions often speak louder than words. You can show you care by giving a hug, sending flowers, writing a handwritten note or offering to mow the lawn or do the laundry.

When you do these things, it helps the other person feel loved and supportive.

But, if you're looking for something to say, here are some ways to articulate that you care:

"I'm here for you."

"How can I help you?"

"What do you need right now?"

"I'm happy to listen any time."

"I would like to do _____ for you."

There is No Script for Empathy: The reality is that there is no script for empathy. It's less about what you say and more about showing up and listening well. But, I hope that these examples help you avoid the well-worn clichés and find a better way to express empathy to those around you.