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INTRODUCTION

I have to tell you something up front: I think you're awesome. I assume you're reading this book or considering reading this book because you want to figure out how you can be a better friend to people around you who are going through the devastation of losing someone they love. You want to be better equipped for the awkward interactions. You don't want to be that person who said the stupid, hurtful thing. Instead you want to grow in your ability to come alongside someone who is hurting and enter in. So I applaud you for being willing to invest in finding out more about what that looks and sounds like.

To be honest, I didn't think much about grief or grieving people for most of my life. I didn't have to. Or, what is, perhaps, more deeply true, is that I didn't choose to. I suppose I operated with a convenient naiveté about the deep sorrow and social awkwardness people experience when someone they love dies. But once you've been there, it is more difficult to keep an unaffected distance from people in your world who have lost someone and are wondering how the world around them could just keep on turning as if nothing has changed, since it feels as if their world has collapsed.

Over the past sixteen years since our daughter, Hope, and

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later our son Gabriel died, I've interacted with a lot of grieving people. I've listened to grieving people talk about their deep disappointment and ongoing alienation from people around them who just don't seem to "get it." But I've also heard them speak movingly of the unexpected, often simple things people around them have said or done that demonstrated a deep sensitivity to their pain and a willingness to enter into it with them.

It's easy to sit with grieving people and swap stories about ridiculous, thoughtless, insensitive things people around them have said and done. Too easy, perhaps. What is much sweeter and certainly more helpful is to talk about what people have said or done that touched them deeply, what was especially meaningful and helped them not feel so alone in the midst of sorrow. So that's what I asked people to do. I asked them, via an online survey posted on various websites, to tell me what others said or did for them that was especially helpful or meaningful in the midst of grief. I asked them what they wish those around them had understood about their grief. I heard from people of all ages and situations who have experienced all kinds of losses. And I've incorporated what these grieving people told me throughout this book.

In fact, I've just got to share a few things people told me here at the outset so you'll have a taste of what's ahead. If you doubt that you have any power to bring comfort to someone going through unimaginable loss, surely these will convince you otherwise:

When my grandmother passed away from dementia, someone wrote, "I'm so sorry you didn't get to say good-bye the way you wanted to." It still brings tears to my eyes that someone said exactly what I didn't even know how to express.

Emily McKillip, Fort Worth, Texas

Almost a year after our infant son was born dead, a woman at church talked about him, using his name in a conversation, and I almost wept with gratitude! I didn't realize how much it hurt that everyone tried not to talk about him to protect me from further pain, when really the most pain was from others dodging his existence at every turn.

Lindsey Coffman, Milford, Kansas

In the hospital cafeteria one day with my pastor, I said, "I'm not sure I can hold on to God through this." He answered, "You can't hold on to him, but he will hold on to you." That gave me such comfort—knowing I could just let God hold on to me, and he has.

Judy Joyce, Richmond, Virginia

After my husband died, a friend invited me to stay with her and her husband for a while in a little cottage in their backyard. I had space to be alone when I couldn't handle social situations, but they were nearby if I needed to talk.

Carol Miller, Waverly, NY

My husband and I were in our doctor's office waiting room a few months after our thirty-four-year-old son died. An acquaintance whose son had played basketball with our son worked there. She glanced at us from the back of the office and could have easily looked away. Instead, she got up from her desk, walked out and around through several doors, and came up to us. She said, "I am sorry to do this here, but this has to be acknowledged." She tenderly hugged each of us in the middle of the waiting room. I had some tears, but it touched my soul.

Jan Kelley, Wichita, Kansas

The morning after our son passed, as I rose dreading another day, there was our elderly new neighbor, meticulously

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sweeping our sidewalk. He never looked up; he just swept and went on his way. I will never forget that singular, anonymous act of kindness.

GriefShare facilitator, Tampa Bay, Florida

My wife and I had tried for about seven years to get pregnant, which was its own monthly agony. Then we got pregnant and announced it to our church friends, and we all rejoiced. Then we miscarried, and we were devastated, as were our friends. The one caring comment that I've never forgotten came from a man who never talked much. He looked me right in the eye, with tears in his, and said he knew that some people might try to comfort us with the thought that because the miscarriage happened early, it would hurt less. Then he said, "As soon as you knew you were pregnant, you were in love with that baby." He said he knew how much we must be hurting, and he was sorry. I've never forgotten that brief conversation. I'm tearing up as I write this, more than twenty-five years later.

David J. Myers, Caldwell, Idaho

After our son drowned, a friend called me up and said, "I am going to make us hair appointments for the same time so I can take you." When she called ahead, she told our hairdresser what had happened so she would not start asking me about the kids.

Rachel Anderson, College Station, Texas

Six months after losing our baby, we went to a wedding. As we were leaving the party, the couple asked if they could leave a bouquet of their wedding flowers on our daughter's grave. In the midst of their happiest day they remembered our sadness.

Ruth, UK

In the span of three months three of my young friends passed away. The most significant thing someone did for me was to continuously pursue friendship with my tired self. Instead of pitying me from afar, she entered in with compassion. This meant sometimes being able to talk about where I was and how I was coping, but most of the time it meant helping me to see the beauty in life by exploring the city in which we live, going out with girls, trying new coffee shops, etc. Being a friend who drew near in spite of my changing moods and energy levels reminded me that regardless, I was ever loved.

Beth Gowing, Montreal, Quebec, Canada

In my grief I needed to discharge my burden, and I needed someone who was in God's Word and walking in it. I needed seasoned maturity, a loving heart, and all that comes with it. I knew such a person and told her I needed to talk. She sat outside with me on folding chairs between our parked cars for hours on end as I shared my story and my grief. I spoke in linear fashion; she spoke but little, but when she did, it was right and something I could use. The evening came on, but I was not done. After we took care of some things, we found our selves at a track. We walked around it again and again as I finished my story. Night fell, my burden discharged.

Anonymous

Simple but incredible stuff, don't you think? When I read things like this, I wonder why I ever hesitate to speak up or reach out to someone who is grieving. I wonder why I ever let the temporary awkwardness rob me of the joy and satisfaction of blessing someone in such a significant way during such a difficult time. I hope you feel that way too and that you'll find ideas and encouragement in the pages that follow. I also hope that you will be emboldened to engage instead of avoid the grieving people

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who are all around you and are waiting for someone to interact with them about the loss of their loved one.

Along with the courage to engage, most of us need some wisdom in regard to what meaningful engagement with grieving people looks and sounds like. So let's dive in. Let's explore together what grieving people wish you knew about what really helps and what really hurts.

WHAT TO SAY
(AND WHAT NOT TO SAY)

It was just two months after our daughter, Hope, died. My husband, David, and I found ourselves attending two funerals in one day—one for a baby who had died at birth, and another for a child who had died of the same syndrome our daughter had. I was waiting in line to greet the parents at the first funeral, when it hit me: *I have no idea what to say. Of all people, I should know what to say to these friends.* But I didn't. I had no great wisdom that would answer the questions, no soothing truth that would take away the hurt.

I stumbled through both encounters and walked away with sympathy for all the people who, over the previous months, had struggled to know what to say to David and me. And I went away with more compassion for those who'd felt so helpless that they'd said nothing at all.

Let's face it—it's awkward. We want to say something personal, something meaningful, beautiful, helpful, sensitive.

Something that demonstrates that we have a sense of what they're going through. And what we don't want is to be that person who said the stupid, insensitive thing.

Over many years now of interacting with grieving people—most of whom emerge from their experience of sorrow bent on setting the world straight on what to say and what not to say to people like themselves—I've learned a thing or two that people going through grief wish people understood. I have lots of specific, practical, usable ideas in the pages that follow, but the first and most important thing I have to tell you is this:

It matters less what you say than that you say *something*.

I remember well what a friend who had lost a child told me shortly before Hope died. "It wasn't so much what people said that hurt," she said. "What hurt was when people said nothing at all." All too soon I discovered what she meant; the silence that seemed to scream that my daughter's life didn't even merit a mention. And, oh, how it hurt.

My husband discovered it too on his first day back to work after Hope died. A man came into his office talking a mile a minute but didn't acknowledge our loss at all. David knew he knew. Maybe he thought David wouldn't want to talk about it. Maybe he didn't know how to bring it up. Maybe he thought the office was not the place for it. Most likely he just felt awkward and unsure of what to say, and so he just said nothing. Whatever it was, it hurt.

I also remember well, however, that humbling day when I realized how often I had been that person—that person who said *nothing* about the loss of a loved one to someone stinging with grief. I saw my friend Susan, whose mother had died. I remembered how I had neglected to say anything early on, assuming that since so many other people were speaking to her about her loss, surely she wouldn't notice if I didn't.

What I didn't understand at the time is that when you're grieving, you know who has acknowledged it in some way and who hasn't. You just do.

Saying something about it tells me that you know that it's there, and you care that it's there, and you care about me. Not mentioning it, for whatever reason, makes me feel less cared for by you. In fact, because you choose not to say anything about it, because you choose not to acknowledge it, I find myself doubting whether you care about me at all, because this is the very hardest, biggest thing in my life. If you don't acknowledge it, much less enter into it with me, it puts a huge distance between us.

If I were going through some big happy life change—going to college, or getting married, or having a baby—it would be very strange if you kept refusing to acknowledge it or never wanted to hear anything about it. This grief and loss that I am experiencing are no less life changing.

I don't expect you to know what to say. I'm not asking you to have the answers. In fact, rather than sitting there worrying about what you should say to me, it would be incredible if you would just invite me to share with you. I would feel so loved. But when you don't ask, when you don't bring up this grief, when you so clearly feel uncomfortable with anything vaguely relating to my pain, it makes me feel that my grief is too much for you, that you're not willing to enter into it with me in even the smallest way, and that hurts tremendously.

Jamie Lorenz, Spokane Valley, Washington

Last night I was talking with a friend who was trying to figure out if and how to reach out to someone she hasn't talked to for years who just lost her thirty-five-year-old son. I explained to her that when someone you love has died, it is as if a hurdle has

been placed between you and every person you know, and that hurdle stays in place until your loss has been acknowledged in some way. It doesn't have to be a grand gesture or a long conversation. Sometimes a simple, "I know what has happened and I'm so sorry," or even a nonverbal hand on the shoulder or squeeze of the hand will knock down that barrier.

A few months after our daughter died, I was in the car pool line waiting to pick up my son from school, when another mom, who had a daughter born a short time before Hope, came up to my car. She told me that she felt awkward every time she saw me because she still had her daughter while mine was gone, and that she didn't know how to get past that awkwardness. "You just did," I told her. Simply acknowledging that the barrier was there knocked it down.

Don't hesitate to approach someone because you think it has been too long since his or her loved one died so that they've probably moved on and wouldn't want to talk about it anymore. The reality is more likely to be the opposite. If it has been a while, it is likely that people have stopped talking about the deceased one, but the grieving ones' desire to talk about him or her has only increased. So bring it up. And keep bringing it up over the coming months and even years. That is a gift a true friend gives someone who is grieving.

We love to talk about Savannah, and nothing could be said that would hurt us any more than we were hurting. It actually hurt more when someone didn't say something. Especially when those someones were family members. I think that our presence at family events, just the five of us instead of six, stirred up their grief, and they didn't know what to say or do. It was easier to just stay away, which I interpreted at the time as them not caring or loving Savannah.

Jennifer, Louisiana

I think women do a great job at surrounding one another, encouraging one another, creating a support network. But men, not so much. I can remember one particular Sunday when I stayed home and Peter came home to tell me how many of my friends had asked how I was doing. He was happy about the support I received but crushed that they hadn't acknowledged his grief too. So don't forget that men grieve too.

Sarah Damaska, North Branch, Michigan

The second thing I have to tell you about your desire to know what to say, before we dive into ideas about what to say, is this: even if you come up with the perfect thing to say (as if there is such a thing), it simply won't fix the hurt or solve the problem of the people who are grieving.

Does that take some pressure off? I hope so. Really, there is nothing you can say that will make their loss hurt less. It's going to hurt for a while. They're not looking to you to make sense of it or to say something they haven't thought of or something that makes it not hurt. Your purpose in saying something is to enter into the hurt with them and let them know they are not alone.

It's not up to you to say something that answers the significant questions they are asking. Those take some time to work through, and if they sense your willingness to linger with them a bit in the midst of the questions rather than offer simplistic answers, they're more likely to want to explore them with you down the road. It's not up to you to recommend the book they need to read, the counselor they need to see, the drug they need to take. You don't have to provide for them a recommended framework for thinking and feeling their way through their loss. Really, you just have to show up and say very little except maybe—and forgive me if this offends you, but I just don't know a better way to express it— “This sucks.”

And older lady from our church sat me and my brothers down and tried to prepare us for returning to school after the sudden death of our father. She said, “Death sucks!” I was shocked to hear that word come out of an adult woman and a Christian at that. But she said there is no other way to express what we were going through other than that it sucked! It was so helpful and funny to hear someone use a strong word to express the horrible situation we were in.

Jordon, Washington

It’s not up to you to make the pain go away, even though you would love to be able to do so. Grieving people are not expecting you to make the pain go away. They’re really just hoping that you will be willing to hurt with them. That’s what makes a great friend in the midst of grief! He or she comes alongside and is willing, at least for a while, to agree that this is terrible, unexplainable, the worst. No forced looking on the bright side. At least not yet. No suggesting you should be grateful for anything. At least not yet. To have a friend who, with a shake of the head and a sense of “How can this be?” refuses to rush too quickly past sharing a sense of agonized disappointment at the reality of death—what a gift.

A couple came who had lost a son. The wife looked at me at one point and said, “Someday this will be okay. Not today. Not tomorrow. But someday, it will be okay.” I hung on to that. It had to be someone who had experienced this level of grief, though, in order for me to believe it.

Sharon Smith, Muncie, Indiana

So how do you begin to formulate what you might say when the time comes? It depends.

It depends on the nature of your relationship with the person.

What we say to a business colleague will be different from what we say to a close, personal friend or family member.

It depends on the where that person is in the process of grief. What we say on the day a loved one has died, or when we greet someone at the visitation is likely different from what we might say a few weeks, a few months, or even a few years later.

Grieving people are as different from each other as—well, as different from each other as people are different from each other. What is helpful and meaningful to one person may be unwanted or even annoying to another. Words welcomed by one grieving person may be offensive to another. There are no one-size-fits-all words or deeds. There are just lots of hurting people who feel sad and lonely and are desperate to know that there are people around them who are willing to get outside of themselves to enter into their sorrow in a meaningful way.

Let's begin with the basics.

LET THE GRIEVING PERSON TAKE THE LEAD

Some people go through the visitation, funeral, or memorial service and the days immediately following with a great sense of strength, and they relish the interaction with people who have come around them at this difficult time. Others are worn out, overcome, and can barely converse with those who have come to express their sympathy.

Determine in advance and discipline yourself in the moment to listen more than you talk. Some of us have lots of words. We feel awkward with silence, so we tend to instinctually fill it up with words. But there is great power and comfort in simply showing up and being willing to sit in the silence and listen to the person who is grieving give voice to their regrets about the past, fears about the future, complaints about what others have

said or done, rehearsals of the events that transpired, questions about God and life after death, chaotic thoughts, conflicting feelings, disappointments, desires, and despair. For good friends of the grieving, this companionship through grief is something that takes place over the long haul. It's not up to you to fix all of their faulty thinking every step along the way. Instead of driving the conversation, hold back. Take the humble position of letting the grieving person take the lead in when to talk and what to talk about.

Just because the words on the tip of your tongue are true doesn't make it okay to say them. Or perhaps *now* is not the time to say them. For example, yes, God is good. No question. But that doesn't mean it's appropriate or helpful for you to say to the person overwhelmed by the crushing news of a loved one's death, "God is good." Now, if the grieving person says to you, "I know that God is good," you can agree heartily, even mentioning some specific ways we know he is good that can be taken hold of in the midst of something that is not good at all! But even then, you will want to acknowledge that you are well aware that it still hurts. Let the grieving ones be the first to state their feelings or conclusions, and then follow their lead.

DON'T ASSUME

Sometimes grief is complicated by other emotions such as relief (especially if death occurred after an extended illness or intense suffering), anger (toward a doctor who made a mistake or the loved one who took his own life), or shame (whether justified or not). Some people have a deep sense of joy that their loved one is free of the pain or difficulty of this life. Others have a deep sense of dread that life will never be good again, and they simply can't stand the suggestion that it will.

We who have experienced a similar loss to the grieving person have to be especially sensitive about making assumptions. I often find myself—out of a desire to connect and empathize—wanting to say, “I know you feel sad,” and, “I know it hurts.” But the truth is, I don’t know. My experience of grief was mine, and theirs is theirs.

Sometimes we assume, for example, when people lose a parent, that they have lots of pleasant memories of that parent. Maybe they don’t. Maybe they always felt belittled or unloved by that parent and have few, if any, good memories. Certainly that parent’s death will bring about some significant feelings. Most of us, in the midst of grief, have mixed and even conflicting feelings. Don’t assume you know what someone else is feeling.

We can tend to assume a lot of things that we probably shouldn’t. Don’t assume that those you are comforting are confident that the deceased is now in heaven. Don’t assume they are relieved to be free of the heavy burden of care for someone who was sick a long time. Don’t assume they want to feel better anytime soon. Don’t assume they want to get married again.

Don’t assume that because they are in the throws of loss, they have questions that aren’t being answered or they feel abandoned by God. Maybe they have much more Scripture-saturated, Holy Spirit-given clarity than you do. Don’t assume.

DON’T COMPARE

I’m not sure why, but we tend to compare pain: *This is harder than that. That would be worse than this.* You can’t really compare pain. It all just hurts.

So when someone has lost a parent to natural causes, don’t suggest that such a loss is so much easier than losing that parent to some other cause of death. When a couple loses an unborn

child, don't say that it would be so much harder to lose a child that had lived with them.

I wish people understood that this loss was uniquely mine. It could not compare with anything else. I did not want to hear about a loss of theirs or anyone they knew.

Jeanne Pierce, San Antonio, Texas

Don't compare the grieving person's loss to your own loss or anyone else's. Let it be all about him or her and the loved one who has died.

DON'T FEEL THE NEED TO FIX

We hate loose ends. We want to end every conversation with everyone smiling and assured that everything will be just fine. But that's not always reality, and sometimes, what people need is to wrestle for a while with the ugliness and uncertainties rather than feel better and move on. Offering real comforter to those who are grieving is not about leaving them with a happy thought, but more about accepting where they are—whether that be happy or sad, confident or confused. We don't have to fix everything or make sense of everything in the course of our brief conversation. Instead, we can be willing to enter into the unanswered questions and unresolved conclusions and uncomfortable realities.

When I expressed to a (well-meaning) friend how alone I felt, her response was, "But you are not alone! Every time you hear those words in your mind you need to fight! Go read Psalm 34, write it out! Keep it in your pocket! you are NOT alone." This, unfortunately, made me feel worse, like I had a spiritual problem on top of everything else.

Doris, Ontario, Canada