

ALTERNATIVES TO “I’M SORRY”



What do you say when you find out someone died? What words do you write in a sympathy card or email? It’s a universal struggle to know what to say in an inherently emotional and potentially uncomfortable situation.

Friends, teachers, and colleagues often don’t know what to say or how to react when they hear that someone’s parent, sibling, friend, or other family member died. This can lead many people, including children and teens, to avoid any topic that connects to their loss. Grieving people brace for the automatic, “I’m sorry,” that often follows when they share that someone in their life died.

When asked why “I’m sorry” doesn’t work well, children and teens had this to say:

“How am I supposed to respond? It’s okay? I mean, really, it’s not okay.”

“Um, it’s not their fault, why are they apologizing?”

“It’s just so awkward. It’s like a total conversation stopper.”

“So many people say it, even people I’ve never talked to before, it feels kind of fake.”

“I know they mean well, but it just gets old.”

Does this mean definitively that you should never say, “I’m sorry” to someone who is grieving? No, it’s just helpful to consider the relationship you have with the person and the context of the conversation when choosing what to say. Ask yourself the question, “Is what I’m about to say going to connect or disconnect the conversation?”

Sometimes “I’m sorry” can act as an interruption. This may happen when a person shares about a death as part of a bigger story. When “I’m sorry” is interjected, it can stop the flow of conversation, and leave the teller with the awkward task of saying something like, “It’s okay, it was a long time ago.”

On the other hand, if a friend calls to tell you that someone died, that’s a time when an authentic, heartfelt, “I’m sorry” can serve as a connection. Even in that situation though, keep in mind that the person on the other end of the line has likely heard those words many times over, so it can be good to try and think of something different to say. A few possibilities include: “I’m so sad to hear this,” “I’m so sorry you have to go through this,” and “How heartbreaking.” Another option is just to repeat back what the person tells you, “Your dad died last night.” This gives them the opportunity to say more and direct the conversation.

WHAT TO SAY
INSTEAD OF
“I’M SORRY”

When it comes to children and teens, one of the only alternatives they've offered is, "That totally sucks." Of course, if that's language you're not comfortable with, you might come up with something else that acknowledges the reality of the loss without verging into what the teens call, "sympathy overload." Many teens appreciate when people can remain matter of fact while talking about the death.

In the end, there are no perfect words to say. Just keep in mind that grieving people are navigating conversations, big and small, throughout the day that have the potential to highlight their loss. Conveying a sense of calm and ease when someone does tell you about a death goes a long way to dismantle the awkwardness and discomfort they are used to encountering. From

that foundation, you can choose which words to say, based on your connection with that person and the context of the conversation. Try

writing down a few alternative phrases that work for you. This will make it easier to access them the next time you want to communicate that you care to someone who is grieving.



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Founded in 1982, Dougy Center provides grief support in a safe place where children, teens, young adults, and their families can share their experiences before and after a death. Dougy Center provides support and training locally, nationally, and internationally to individuals and organizations seeking to assist children in grief.

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