



# What Do You Say to Someone Who Lost a Coworker?

Insights

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We've had a difficult Summer and Fall ... Hurricanes, the Las Vegas shooting, California fires ... and now the firestorm about Presidents contacting family members whose loved ones were killed in battle. Many people have had to deal with friends and coworkers who lost someone.

I have handled over 560 workplace fatalities involving as many as 12 employees killed. I have had to speak to devastated spouses, parents and children. I have interviewed witnesses in shock because they lost a coworker, who was also a friend or even family. I've worked with clients who are concerned that a supervisor or employee who contributed to an accident might harm themselves. I am not a psychologist, but my clients' employees matter to me and I try to anticipate what they need – which is also good business. Fatalities can undo years of work spent to build your workplace culture. Workplace catastrophes can end a business.

It sounds so sterile to use terms such as *"workplace fatalities."* I almost wish that we used the term *"souls"* as do air traffic controllers when they describe the number of people on a plane. We're talking about a visceral painful subject. We're not talking about statistics. The person who died was someone's son, daughter, husband, wife, or parent. How can we possibly appreciate how the person feels?

## What about coworkers?

Now consider what it's like when employees lose a coworker. Maybe they advanced together through the apprentice and journeymen program. Maybe the employees rode together to and from work. Perhaps, they only worked together the day that the employee died. Or maybe, you are talking to someone who supervised the work when the employee was killed.

Intellectually, we understand that an employee has been deeply affected by the loss of a coworker, but it's important to thoughtfully consider how to handle them.

Here are a few of my observations based on trial and error:

- Never be surprised by how employees are effected or by "who" is effected.
- It does not matter how tough you are, a grief counselor is generally a good idea.
- There is no shame in seeking help.

- Support families who lost someone and coworkers as you would want to be treated. You are not admitting guilt or creating legal problems by responding as decent people (and companies) should respond. Take care of your own.
- Everyone on a job site may feel some degree of *“survivors’ guilt.”* This reaction is often irrational, but even coworkers with no supervisory responsibility may feel guilt.
- *When one feels guilt and pain, one reaction is to try to shift that pain to another target – such as saying unfounded things such as “we knew this could happen,” or “we should have done X or Y.”*
- Provide more physical help than words
- Don’t try to explain away what happened. Just be there.
- Everyone is attentive in the first few weeks – follow up weeks and months later.

We recently discussed a book in our Church small group of six couples composed of six couples at a similar stage in life. We have all had life challenges and hurt – one couple recently lost a good and decent son to drug overdose, which has reinforced my commitment to address opiate abuse.

The book, *Half Truths: God Helps Those Who Help Themselves and Other Things the Bible Doesn’t Say*, included a chapter entitled *“Everything Happens for a Reason,”* which discussed whether God intends bad friends to happen and whether we should view these occurrences as *“part of God’s plan.”*

The author rejected the idea that most people want you to tell them that *“this was all in God’s plan”* or *“he’s in a better place.”* I don’t want to get into theology. Maybe these statements are correct. I have friends whose faith became real and was all that carried them through a terrible loss. At some points, many of the above statements gave them strength. But many people do not want to hear that message ... or maybe more importantly, at least not at that moment. We have to be nuanced and determine who needs such a message and who needs a different tone. Everyone is different ... think before you speak. And maybe ... speak less ....

Below are some of my recommendations as an untrained lawyer and not a psychologist:

### **Good Comments:**

1. I am so sorry for your loss.
2. I know it’s rough; I wish I had something to say to make you feel better.
3. I’m here for you.
4. I wish I had the right words; just know I care.
5. I don’t know how you feel, but I am here to help in any way I can.
6. You’ll be in my thoughts and prayers.

7. Sometimes, it's fine to say what that person meant to you or how they helped you, or share a memory.
8. I am just a phone call away.
9. Give a hug instead of saying something
10. We all need help at times like this, I am here for you.
11. I am usually up early or late, if you need anything.
12. Saying nothing, just be with the person.

**Please generally don't say these things:**

1. At least he lived a long life, many people die young
2. He is in a better place
3. There is a reason for everything
4. She was such a good person God wanted her to be with him
5. She did what she came here to do and it was her time to go.
6. God has a plan.

Faith is a vital thing. I am not saying that you should not reference your shared faith, or even say some of the above things - but be thoughtful and careful of what you say. Ask yourself what will most help this person at this moment.

**We're Living in a Time of Loss – the Military Approach to Notifying Families.**

The US Military assigns Casualty Notification Officers to go to families who lose a son, daughter or other family members. The Casualty Notification Officers get over 40 hours of training and stick with the family over the following days. ([2010 Article on Casualty Notification Officers](#)).

For a moving discussion of how to tell a grieving person that their loved one has died, [read the transcript](#), or even better, listen to the audio of White House Chief of Staff Kelly, a former General whose son died in Afghanistan, describe how the Army notifies next of kin. Forget the current shameful political posturing and simply consider what this man has to say about dealing with someone who has lost a loved one. I don't care about the politics ... I was moved by these visceral comments by a former Marine General who lost his son in Afghanistan.

Several statements particularly struck me:

*Who writes letters to the families? Typically, the company commander — in my case, as a Marine — the company commander, battalion commander, regimental commander, division commander, Secretary of Defense, typically the service chief, commandant of the Marine Corps, and the President typically writes a letter.*

Typically, the only phone calls a family receives are the most important phone calls they could imagine, and that is from their buddies. In my case, hours after my son was killed, his friends were calling us from Afghanistan, telling us what a great guy he was. Those are the only phone calls that really mattered.

**And yeah, the letters count, to a degree, but there's not much that really can take the edge off what a family member is going through.**

General Kelley on his advice to President Trump:

*So he called four people the other day and expressed his condolences in the best way that he could.*

**And he said to me, what do I say? I said to him, sir, there's nothing you can do to lighten the burden on these families.**

On Casualty Officers:

*So that's the process. While that's happening, a casualty officer typically goes to the home very early in the morning and waits for the first lights to come on. And then he knocks on the door; typically a mom and dad will answer, a wife. And if there is a wife, this is happening in two different places; if the parents are divorced, three different places. **And the casualty officer proceeds to break the heart of a family member and stays with that family until — well, for a long, long time, even after the internment.** So that's what happens*

As I explained, I am not a psychologist. I am not trained in grief counseling. But when I unexpectedly lost my father when I was 26, I remember that the people who most helped me were the people who made unvarnished comments ... “we’re there for you ... we’re so sorry.... I care ... I loved your dad ... he did xyz for me.” No upbeat comments ... no philosophy ... no theological or spiritual statements ... just letting me know that they cared. I’m not self-centered enough to think that everyone reacts as do I, but those people were the ones that mattered to me. So, be yourself. You can’t take their pain, but you can let them know you care. I’m not sure that the actual words matter.

Howard