

# Communicating sensitively with bereaved families



the Grief-Sensitive  
Healthcare Project

[grief-sensitivehealthcare.org](http://grief-sensitivehealthcare.org)

## When a patient dies, we may struggle to find the right words.

Unfortunately, there is no singular 'right thing' to say or do when working with bereaved families because grief is so individual. Rather than providing a script, here we provide some tenets to keep in mind and sample phrases that will guide you in communicating sensitively with bereaved families. Sensitive communication is more likely to help families move through a healthy grief process.

### Remain curious

- *How are you feeling?*
- *What's on your mind?*
- *How are you doing?*
- *Can you tell me more about that?*
- *I want to ask what I can do that you would find helpful.*

### Hold a not-knowing stance

- *I imagine...*
- *I don't know for certain...*
- *Is it possible that maybe...*
- *I wonder if you might...*
- Avoid phrases like: "you must be feeling...", "I know how hard this is...", or "I know you're sad."

### Be transparent

- *I have been thinking of you.*
- *You've been on my mind.*
- *Your family has been on my mind.*
- *I've been thinking about...*
- *I'm so glad you've shared that.*
- *I am so sorry this has happened.*

### Collaborate

- *Let's think together about how you'd like to remember [child's name].*
- *I want to spend some time thinking with you about what the next steps should be.*
- *I really want to make sure I understand.*

### Keep relationships in mind

- *I imagine this is not how you anticipated your family would look right now.*
- *How might we help you have a lasting bond with [child's name]?*