Communication and Grief Support: A Special GIFT

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Abstract
Grief has recently been a popular theme in films such as Train Dreams and Hamnet, television shows such as Dead to Me, Shrinking, Severance, The Bear, and many others. While grief does make for sensitive and dramatic storytelling, it is often misunderstood in our culture. The idea that grief moves neatly into a package of "stages" and is only for a specific period is a misnomer (Barney & Yoshimura, 2021; Stillion & Attig, 2015; Barney & Yoshimura, 2020). Grief is something that anyone can experience, and most people will, but is not well understood. If we allow misinformation on grief to permeate our culture without addressing it, we do ourselves and others harm. This activity allows for open discussion about the topic of grief and opens the door to discussions about end-of-life preparation where it is needed. A communication course is the ideal place to discuss the best listening style to support a grieving friend or love one, and is the right place to discuss the common "I don't know what to say" problem that many people have when confronted with the knowledge that a friend has lost a loved one. Many communication courses offer no curriculum on grief, as many instructors have not studied it. This simple activity on supportive communication offers "dos and don'ts" about communication and does not require special materials. It was created by a health communication scholar with a grief research background and used in several of their classes.
Keywords: bereavement, grief, communication

Courses
Interpersonal Communication, Health Communication, Introduction to Communication, Family communication, Relational Communication, Small Group, Public Speaking, and other courses examining competent communication

Learning Objectives
- Identify competent communication strategies for comforting a friend or loved one during grief.
- Identify problematic communication in response to seeing a person suffering from grief.
- Understand how types of listening studied in communication courses can be applied to communicating with someone coping with the difficulty of loss.

Purpose
The purpose of this exercise is to give students the tools to listen well and provide support to friends and loved ones, while also reflecting on their own experience with loss and the complexities of communication surrounding loss experience, particularly death. The exercise also gives students the opportunity to self-disclose, if desired, in a safe space for a small group of fellow students. Communication scholars have noted the difficulty of finding supportive listening for grief (Fessenden & Parker-Brooks, 2024; Wittenberg-Lyles, Goldsmith, Ragan & Sanchez Reilly, 2010). As students complete the exercise, class material on listening and verbal and nonverbal communication can be reviewed or previewed.

Rationale
Communicating about death can be sad, uncomfortable, and confusing (Keeley, 2019). Some cultures, and families, are better about talking about death than others. In some cases, stigma about death discussion can leave the bereaved feeling isolated and alone, and unprepared for the impact of death, as well as making the primary griever or grievers (spouses, grown children, or siblings) feel their experience compounded with guilt and confusion (Kellehear, 2013; Fessenden & Parker-Brooks, 2024).

While much of the research at the end of life and grief has been in psychiatry and psychology, communication studies scholars recognize the need for research and pedagogy around grief and end of life (Keeley, 2019: Wise & Bruns, 2025; Brophy, Seiter & Zhao, 2021). Communication studies have provided excellent research about comfort in dying for the dying, their

family members, and medical professionals (Keeley, 2017; Wittenberg-Lyles, Goldsmith, Ragan & Sanchez-Reilly, 2010).

One of the newest and most engaged interest groups of the National Communication Association is the Death and Dying Interest group. The NCA conference now has Death Cafes and panels, and the group have an active series of webinars and activities.

While the Death and Dying Scholars have created a place for discussion of grief and end of life communication in our communication scholarship community, many basic courses and foundation courses in communication are not teaching our students any curriculum at all about grief communication. Many of our departments have no death scholars and our textbooks are often void of any components on competency in communicating about end of life, or how to react and communicate when a friend or loved one is bereaved.

It is critical to have some communication competency in this topic, as it is universal to human experience. Leaving our students believing that any communication questions about death and grief are only to be addressed with a psychiatrist pathologizes a normal experience and may leave them still saying "I did not know what to say" when a friend or relative is suffering in bereavement. A good course in communication should address this topic.

This GIFTS exercise is a simple but essential tool in competent communication: supporting a grieving friend or loved one through compassionate communication. It is based on an exercise and discussion used in several interpersonal, public speaking, intercultural communication, and introduction to communication courses taught by the author. Each instructor can tailor it to match their level of knowledge, pedagogical style, and the course in question.

Procedure

Explain to the class that there is legitimate research that helps us to understand grief and lend support to friends and loved ones. An instructor may share any knowledge of grief and highlight specific lessons from class during this activity. Conduct this exercise after students have done reading in listening and other ideas related to the course. This exercise is not intended for the first couple of weeks of the course.

Suggested instructor statement: "*Today we will discuss ways to help a grieving friend or loved one, and how what we have been learning in class can assist us in being a supportive communicator and friend or family member."*

Separate students into groups of four or five per group. Explain that self-disclosure is welcome but not required. Students are to discuss the "grief competent communication" sheet and offer their thoughts and opinions. Students may discuss firsthand experiences, favorite television or film narratives, or stories told to them by friends and families in their life regarding the experience of grief and the communication surrounding it. Group discussion should be at least twenty minutes.

Materials

Students should have a paper and pen and be given copies of the Grief Communication Competency worksheet. Students should close laptops and put away phones.

Grief Communication Competency

1. Listen. Listen actively and supportively.
2. Be available. Call weeks and months later-many people feel isolated when the funeral is over, and flowers are no longer being sent.
3. Talk about things you know about the deceased and encourage memorialization.
4. Avoid telling the bereaved "they are in a better place" or "they are with Jesus" - beliefs differ.
5. Don't lecture or advise (unless asked) and avoid telling the bereaved what "stage" you think they are in (that is misinformation and not based on evidence).
6. Don't be obsessed with the perfect thing to say. Be kind and available and let the bereaved lead the way in how much to talk or be together.
7. As time goes by, extend invitations for holidays and get togethers. Be gracious and understanding about responses.
8. Continue to call and send cards or messages. Don't assume they are "over it," or that grief has a specific timeline.
9. Do be aware that a person can change because of grief and deaths of those closest to us can challenge or change our identity.
10. Don't minimize loss by commenting on the time together or the nature of relationship (i.e., not married, "just a pet," or "you had a lot of years together" and other dismissive comments).
11. Don't avoid the bereaved out of "awkwardness."
12. Don't respond with "my family is so lucky, grandma is still here at 95"- the grieving person does not need to hear that you are glad you are not them!
13. If you are one of the mourners or grievers, take on only what you can and be responsive to your own physical and mental health.

Debrief

Allow students to ask questions and comment on the Grief Competency Worksheet and their discussions. Remind them that some discussion should stay within the group if self-disclosure has taken place. Call for questions. Review class subject matter and provide any instructor comments.

Outcomes and Limitations

The activity has been used in several interpersonal and intercultural communication classes, and a few public speaking classes. The discussion is lively, and students share and relate the material well to the class. Some students do report that the topic is heavy, but they do not seem to have trouble with the level of the activity or be resistant.

The limitations can include any trouble the instructor may have with the topic or concerns about student

mental health. It is advised that instructors explain that the activity is meant to be empowering, and can help with any communication related to loss, which is part of life. Providing a warning in the syllabus may be warranted. All instructors should have a grasp of on campus services to refer students when teaching a communication class. Courses in communication can be challenging because of the serious topics we cover. Instructors should also be aware of their own response to this topic and be prepared to discuss the preparation for the activity, and its aftermath, with friends and/or colleagues.

Appriasal

Students engaged well with the topic, citing its relation to previous material covered in class and "real life" situations. Students reported their appreciation of the seriousness of the topic and the problems inherent in dealing with such topics when people are unskilled at listening. When asked what type of listening was most helpful during bereavement, students frequently pointed out supportive listening and the importance of active listening, and that supportive listening is critical for competent grief communication. Several students said that the exercise made them appreciate the class as something more than a requirement. Students commented that the exercise and information provided helped them reduce anxiety about not knowing how to comfort a friend or relative who is experiencing grief. Students also mentioned hearing complaints from family members about incompetent communication when they experienced a death in the family, and they appreciated the inclusion of grief competency in the class.

Bonus Activity

If time allows in class, and the instructor desires to use some entertainment and expand the conversation, view the following:

- (2021) "On a Serpentine Road, With the Top Down" Season 2, Episode 1 of Modern Love, available on MGM plus and Amazon Prime Video. This touching, 36-minute story demonstrates the power of objects in our lives and how difficult it is to let go of a prized possession when it belonged to a loved one now gone. Suitable watching for all ages.

Discuss the importance of objects and object language related to time, place and relationships, and their place in grief and remembrance.

Conclusion

While there is no perfect way to communicate grief, demonstrating active listening and supportive listening is most helpful. Avoid judging, allow spouses, children, and best friends to express grief. Do not tell them they should be "over it." There may be times that we do not communicate well regarding death and grief. No one is a perfect communicator, but we should all continue to improve and be open to feedback.

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