

4 steps to offering grief support using social media.

It's a Facebook update. It's a tweet. It may even be on Instagram:

"It's with deep sadness that I have to say that after a [long battle, short illness, sudden event], my [mom, son, grandpa, best friend] has [passed, died, left us]."

Sometimes there are a few other details or comments about arrangements or requests for tributes.

I wonder. (Even though I literally [wrote a book on this.](#))

But when we see in social media that there has been a death, what do we say?

You know, as well as I, that there are many responses that are not helpful. Comments about how we recovered from a similar loss so they should be fine. Observations on how this should feel. Questions about details of the death. Observations about what this should teach other people about how to behave.

This week, [Jon Acuff said](#), "The best time to offer advice or accountability is when someone asks for it. The worst time is any other time."

I'm assuming that you are not wanting to learn ways to be rude. (You wouldn't be among the readers of this newsletter.)

Instead, we are wanting to figure out the best way to be supportive to the person who has posted, to the friends and family facing this loss. Drawing on some of my experience and training and observation, I'd like to suggest a way forward.

1. Know your reason for responding.

Why do you want to say something? Why do you have to say anything?

Social media invites comment. Social media creates in our brains a tiny bit of guilt: Now that we know about this loss, we have the responsibility to comment.

But a piece of information doesn't demand an immediate reaction. It invites a response.

What's actually happening, in part, is that the social media platform is creating a perceived vacuum which can mask the actual vacuum in a friend's life. And the click on social may make us think we've done all we need to.

What many of us know is that in times of loss we want quiet presence more than words, or we want support more than presence, or we want financial help with the funeral costs more than flowers, or we simply don't know what we want.

We would benefit from more than a click.

Consider why you have to click "like" or "heart". Is it for them or for Facebook?

Start with the purpose, not the platform.

2. Decide what message you want to convey.

Maybe you want to let them know that you see them, that you know there is loss. Maybe you want to provide logistical support. Maybe you want to let them know you'll follow up in a couple weeks.

- You can say, "I'm guessing that this hurts. I wish I was there to be quiet. SO, I'll be quiet here."
- You can say, "I bet that your dad was so proud of you."
- You can say, "I'll take care of the driveway."
- You can say, "I love you."

When you think for a moment, you know what kinds of things you want to say based on how you connect with this person. You're ready to move to step three.

3. Consider the best medium, the best platform, for that message to that person.

It could be commenting in the comment field on their post. I do that sometimes. But I also am horrible at offering personal words in a group or a public space. I want to talk specifically to them.

There may be other ways.

- You could shoot a little video clip and share it with them a few days after the funeral, offering your own tribute to their loved on.

- You could send them an email that is mostly blank and says, “This space is intentionally left silent with you.”
- You could send them an actual physical card.
- You could send them a direct message or a text.
- You could show up physically.

Once we know there are options, we can connect our message to the most helpful way (or ways) of connecting.

(TIP: Whatever the message and the media, you also have the option of saying, "Don't worry about responding to this. I just want you to know that I know." There is great freedom in not feeling obligated to respond.)

4. Consider timing, but not so much you never respond.

Here’s a confession. I sometimes get so caught up in sorting through the best thing to do that I don’t do anything right away. And then, because I’ve taken so long, I don’t do anything.

But, I’m increasingly aware that sometime is better than never. I recently wrote to the family of a relative of mine, acknowledging that I had been a terrible correspondent, particularly not following up after hearing about a difficult time. I heard back, “Be at peace. He wouldn’t want you wasting your energy on regretting.”

Don't get consumed by fear of doing it wrong. Respond.

Say something helpful for thoughtful reasons in a medium that's comfortable for you and your friend.

Then, remember to hit [send].

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Dr. Jon Swanson is a writer, hospital chaplain, researcher, and teacher who helps people find sense at urgent and important times. His book, [*“This is Hard”: What I Say When Loved Ones Die*](#), is available on Amazon. This post and other research on being helpful in loss is available at thisishard.substack.com.