

Condolence Letters

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Condolence letters can provide great comfort to those who have had a loved one die. At the very least, they affirm that you have acknowledged their loss and know that it was significant. More often, they are written to let the bereaved know that you care about them. We have heard over and over how important those cards are to grieving people, and that they are often reread over time and become a part of their grief experience and meaning-making of the loss.

Things to know about Newly Bereaved People

Soon after a loss, it is not unusual for people to be tired, unsure about what they need, emotionally spent, or overwhelmed and not able to take in very much information. Newly bereaved people most commonly have very simple needs: to eat well, drink lots of fluids, get a little exercise, sleep, and most importantly, have people supporting them.

Each death is different and each griever has a unique experience, so it is most important to be flexible about what you think you know about the person or the situation. For one person, going back to work may be impossible; for another, it may be the one place where things are predictable and familiar.

Grieving takes time, usually longer than the one or two months people are given to wrap up the post-death business, feel their feelings, adjust their lives, and move on. The process is one of coming to grips with the implications of a permanent change in their lives. Anniversaries of the death, significant dates and future events (like children's graduations) that they would have shared with that person are likely to bring up grief spasms, when emotions and responses may be reactivated again, and support would mean a lot.

Guidelines

Here are some general guidelines for writing condolence letters, whether you are a coworker with a casual connection to the bereaved, or a close family friend with relationships to the deceased and family left behind. Following the guidelines you'll find samples of letters that may help you shape your own.

Make it personal. Write in the language you would speak in. Handwrite it. If you are using a preprinted greeting card, certainly write a couple of sentences in it rather than just signing it. However, if you know the person you are writing to would prefer email, use email. Be as personal in the letter as you have been in relationship with that person: Don't try to create intimacy in their hour of need, and don't back off from their situation because of awkwardness or fear.

Keep it simple. If you are writing soon after the death, keep your message short with the primary intent of making a meaningful and appropriate connection. Keep it about their loss and your responses to it. This is not a time to try and discern the meaning of the death or to encourage people to move on.

Don't give advice or tell them you know how they feel. If you have experienced a loss, you may be tempted to want to tell them how to get through it, or try to connect by letting them know you've had pain too. These are generally not supportive thoughts. It is fine to tell them what helped *you* but don't assume that you know their inner experience and needs.

Avoid trying to soften someone's experience with platitudes, however sincere you may be. Sentiments like "Well, at least he's not suffering anymore" or "God needed her" or "Thank goodness you can still have another child" can be very painful for someone to hear when they wish they had *that* person back with them.

If for any reason you don't send a card soon afterward, it's just as good to send one whenever you hear about the death or whenever you feel you can write. In fact, sometimes these cards are more impactful, as they come in a less crowded time when the bereaved wants to feel that their reality has not been left behind by the world. Consider sending cards (or calling) on other occasions too, like the birthday of the person who died, or their own birthday. We have heard how grateful people are when others remember them at times when it seems that "life has gone on." Remember, their loss is forever and while they may adjust to living without the person, they will not forget them.

Cards should include:

- Acknowledgement of the loss
- Expression of your sympathy
- A reference to the person who died, either noting their significance to the person you are writing to, or talking about your relationship with them
- They *may* include a memory you have about the person who died, which might be
 - Something you shared
 - A way that the person impacted your life
 - Something you laughed about together
 - Qualities you will remember
 - Perhaps something the bereaved didn't know about them, if it's positive

If you have a photo of the person or some kind of keepsake that would be meaningful to them, you might consider sending it along.

If the relationship between the bereaved and the deceased was not a good or easy one, avoid mentioning it at all or comment only to the appropriate level of your relationship. It's okay to mention that you know they may have struggled with some part of the relationship, but leave it at that. This is not the format for bringing up distressing thoughts; remember that your intention is to express sympathy and support.

Offers to help them should be specific, not "Let me know if you need something." Newly bereaved people scarcely know what to ask for most of the time. Only offer what you are confident you can deliver, whether it's a one-time event or an ongoing chore. If you're local, and if it feels appropriate to your relationship, you might offer to:

- Take the kids to school
- Go grocery shopping
- Contact people (social groups, organizations) who don't know about the death yet
- Housesit during the funeral (thieves often target unattended homes when funerals are publicized)
- Substitute for them in activities like Little League or facilitate monthly meetings
- Give them some time off from taking care of the family; a chance to get away alone

Offering is not the same as *assuming* they want or need your help. Even if it is obvious to you that the need is there, they may not be willing or ready to accept it. There are appropriate times to step in and take charge, but just as often grieving people are in such a state of sensitivity and so overwhelmed that they need to have immediate control over what is happening that day and that moment.

If you don't live locally, you can offer to call and check in or give them the option to call you whenever they need to talk (or cry, or babble). Again, don't tell someone to call you anytime, at any hour of the day or night, unless you mean it.

Children

We encourage you to allow a child or teen who wants to include their own expression of care to create their own. Younger children may want to draw a picture rather than write. Be aware that young children sometimes work out their own grief in art and play, so make sure what they send has the same sensitivity for the situation as any other condolence card.

What may take you 15 minutes in writing time can be enormously significant to someone who is feeling isolated, brokenhearted or confused by the magnitude of a death. Never underestimate the power and kindness in being willing to reach out.

Examples of Letters

Dear Sarah,

I was so sorry to hear about your mother's death. I only met her once (at your 30th birthday party) but it was so clear how much you two enjoyed each other's company. I remember her standing up and singing and how much her spontaneity reminded me of you.

I want you to know that I will be here in whatever ways I can. I imagine that it might be challenging for you to keep everything together right now, and I'd be glad to drive the girls to ballet lessons and pick them up. I'd also like to take you out for a spa day when you feel like you have the energy. You are so important to me, and I will hold you in my heart every day. Love, Jean

Dear John,

We were all shocked to hear about the car accident and Jane's death. Everyone here at the office is saddened by her death. We were remembering how much we appreciated her sending cookies with you for us when we were going through the difficult months of moving last year.

I'll call you in a couple of days to talk about what your thoughts are about coming back to work and what we can work out. I'd like you to think about what you want me to tell your clients. I've starting writing out a little script so we're all saying the same thing, but I'll run it by you and see how much you want us to say. In the meantime, the team is shuffling things around to handle your immediate projects. Take care of yourself and know that you are in our thoughts.

Sincerely, Fred

Dear Sam,

I wanted to let you know that I just heard about your brother's death. I never met him, but I'm so sorry about this. I don't have anything profound to say, but I just wanted you to know I was thinking about you.

Al

Bob and Julie,

Please accept our heartfelt sympathies on the loss of your son, Jack. Everyone in his hiking club is stunned and sad at knowing he is gone. A number of the kids got to see him and say goodbye at the hospital and many of them said that his sense of humor and high spirit was there right up to the end. He has many friends who will not forget him.

I want you to know that the club is putting together a fundraising event in his name and proceeds will be donated to help get inner city kids up into the mountains. I'll let you know when we have more details. Please accept our condolences and please remember that even though Jack wasn't here as long as he should have been, he influenced and changed a lot of lives.

Stan Frederick

Dear Ellen,

Many blessings to you at this difficult time. I know your father and you had a rocky time together, and if you want to talk about it, I'm here for you. If not, I'm here for you. I'll see you Sunday at church and if you're up for it, we can plan a time when I can come and make you dinner. Or just bring ice cream. See you soon.

*Your friend,
Beth*

Dear Peter,

It's hard to believe that Ann has been dead for seven months. As this holiday season comes at us, I know we'll all feel her absence. I miss her terribly. I ran across this article about getting through the holidays after a significant loss and I'm sending it along in hopes that you'll find something in there that may be useful. I'll call you Christmas morning. It will be good to hear your voice.

*Love,
Uncle Mark*

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