

How to Talk About Bereavement

A QUICK REFERENCE LANGUAGE GUIDE



The words we use can imply how a bereaved person should cope and adapt to a death. This guide offers language guidance for anyone working with a bereaved person or speaking or writing about bereavement in a workplace, classroom, newsroom, clinical setting, or personal conversation.

Words To Avoid — And What To Use Instead

Heal / Healing	Implies grief has an endpoint. Use “cope” or “adapt” instead.
Closure	Suggests moving on from a relationship. Avoid using altogether.
Resilient / Resilience	Places the responsibility for coping on the individual. Avoid applying it to individuals.
Committed suicide	Implies a crime or moral failing. Use “died by suicide” or “died of suicide.”
Rainbow baby	Can imply that a child born after loss “replaces” the child who died. Avoid the term.
Loss	Can be confused with a missing person. Use “death” when referring to a death.

Key Distinctions

Grief vs. Bereavement	Grief is the emotional response to loss. Bereavement is the event and its surrounding circumstances, including the systems a bereaved person must navigate in the aftermath.
Grief vs. Trauma	Grief is yearning for the person who died. Trauma involves additional distressing elements (e.g., the manner of death, harsh treatment by responders) that can compound grief, but these two concepts are not the same thing.
Unexpected vs. Anticipatory Loss	Unexpected loss allows no opportunity to prepare or say goodbye. Anticipatory loss occurs over time, as with a terminal diagnosis, and carries its own distinct hardships.

General Principles

Specificity matters	“Died by suicide,” “died by homicide,” and “died of an overdose” each carry different social and legal weight for bereaved people. Use the most accurate term available and, when possible, let the bereaved person's own language guide you.
There is no hierarchy of grief	Avoid comparing losses or implying that one type of death or relationship is harder to grieve than another.
There are no stages	Grief does not move through fixed, predictable stages. Avoid language that implies a bereaved person should be “further along.”

About Evermore

Evermore is making the world a more livable place for all bereaved people; to learn more, visit evermore.org.