


Chapter 5

When a Balm Aggravates Pain: The Wrong Words to the Bereaved in Grief and Trauma Counselling

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ABSTRACT

The death of a beloved person usually traumatises the bereaved, causing grief. Remarkably, social supports—family members, friends, religious faithful, clergies, neighbours, and sympathisers—give available support, rich in physical, social, and psychological contents. Words are normally used to convey their support during their visits to the bereaved. However, contrary to expectation that their words would heal the bereaved, such words could eventually aggravate their grief condition. Not only could such words emanate from outside of the bereaved—they could also issue from the bereaved, but producing the same lethality. This chapter provides some of those aggravating words such as “This is a catastrophe,” “Again?” “Just forget about it,” “I know exactly how you feel,” and “you should have ...,” etc. It similarly offers systematic steps on how rehabilitative counsellors could assist social support and the bereaved to acknowledge the dangers inherent in such words, and how to recast them for desirable therapeutic effect.

DOI: 10.4018/979-8-3693-1375-6.ch005

INTRODUCTION

There is likely no living person who has surpassed the age of six, in the view of this writer, who has not experienced loss of a dear one, although the frequency, incidents leading to the loss, experience of attendant grief and trauma, coping and rehabilitative assistance provided and received during the phase may vary. The death could be that of a child, classmate, father, friend, mother, neighbour, sibling, extended family member, or workmate, to list a few. Whoever the deceased is to the bereaved, the loss of a beloved person remains one of life's highly stressful events (Rajic et al., 2023). Thus, one of the prominent ways people react to the loss of loved ones is to grieve. According to Asgari et al. (2023), and Skalski et al. (2022), grief is individual's natural reaction to a loss or absence of a dear person or object considered valuable to the bereaved, or after encountering disasters and traumatic events.

During bereavement, Worden (2018) established that the bereaved passes through four stages of grief corresponding to tasks. These are bereaved person's acceptance of the reality of the loss, their experiencing of the pains attached to the grief, adjusting to new environment, and building of new relationship. Across ages and cultures, network of supports ranging from family members, friends, neighbours, workmates, clergies, classmates, etc., come around to comfort, console, and demonstrate how much they cared for the bereaved in their moment of grief (Aoun et al., 2018; Bottomley, Burke, & Neimeyer, 2017). Either in one-on-one visits or in groups, one invaluable tool possessed and used by the people to convey their care and sympathy to the bereaved is words.

Words spoken at such bereavement visits are meant to strengthen, motivate, encourage, sustain, transform, and restore equilibrium (or peace of mind) of the bereaved. However, either because the utterers are overwhelmed by the occurrence, or imagine the pains the bereaved must have undergone, their words are often not well thought-out, censored, or evaluated for desirable therapeutic effect. The reason is that such words usually offer the direct opposite of their intentions. Thus, they end up weakening, demoralising, discouraging, deflating, transfixing and befuddling the receiver. Therefore, while the statements are intentionally meant to enhance the rehabilitation process of the bereaved, they inadvertently undermine their healing process. In that connection, Rajic et al. (2023) asserted that despite the good intentions of social supports during bereavement, they sometimes say some words or do certain things perceived by the bereaved as either unhelpful or even harmful.

Exploring the nature of the messages offered by social supports to bereaved individuals, Rajic et al. (2023) classified them into two, namely good and supportive messages, and unhelpful or harmful messages. On the one hand, good comments about the deceased, good comments about the bereaved, discussing memories of the deceased, expressing good aspects of the loss, expressing meeting the deceased

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