8 Tips for Writing a Thoughtful Condolence Note

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Your guide

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When times are hard—and there's certainly plenty going on now to make them even harder—a physical card goes much further than a text to show someone you're thinking about them. But when it comes to writing notes, and picking the cards to write them in, many people are left scrambling: How do you show support to someone whose parent has died? Or who has lost a job? Or is going through a divorce? Luckily, you don't need to be an acclaimed writer to write something helpful (in fact, some of history's greatest writers actually sucked at condolence notes). We interviewed a grief guide, a hospice administrator, and an advice columnist for pointers on what to say—and also found some great cards to help show you care.

First decide if you should write at all

People often worry that if they don't know the mourner well—if it's a co-worker or neighbor they're not close with—it is inappropriate to reach out. But that's not necessarily true. According to Diane Snyder Cowan, director of grief services at Cleveland's Hospice of the Western Reserve, when it comes to condolence notes, "Err on the side of sending them to everyone. You're not going to overstep."

But do consider the relationship when deciding how to approach the person, cautions writer and advice columnist John Paul Brammer. "Part of it is definitely

assessing the relationship before you act, taking stock of where you're at," Brammer says. "Just co-workers? Acquaintances? Friends? Because that will color the way you approach it. I wouldn't feel comfortable calling a not-close co-worker or sending them a really long note, but a short note, a simple card—that goes a long way."

Pick the right card

Postable sells a variety of cards that it'll also address and mail for you. Photo: Postable

Darkly funny sympathy cards from Emily McDowell & Friends. Photo: Emily McDowell

Simple and elegant options from Ramona & Ruth. Photo: Ramona & Ruth

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The Cat in a Cage Assortment from Egg Press. Photo: Egg Press
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Postable sells a variety of cards that it'll also address and mail for you. Photo: Postable
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Darkly funny sympathy cards from Emily McDowell & Friends. Photo: Emily McDowell

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Your recipient, your relationship to them, and their experience will all shape what sort of card is the best pick, a task made more difficult by sympathy card shortages at stores across the US in recent months. For people whom you don't know as well, a simple, tasteful card is a safe bet. Wirecutter editor Tim Barribeau recommends the minimalist cotton-paper cards from Omaha, Nebraska-based **Ramona & Ruth**, which beautifully avoid the usual pitfalls of generic bouquets in favor of simple messages, such as "**I am here for you**" and "**I'm truly sorry**."

A more creative approach can work for closer friends. Editor Marilyn Ong likes designer **Emily McDowell's options for illness, loss, and grief**, which feature insightful yet darkly funny messages like "**I know this day really sucks for you**" and "**If this is God's plan, God is a terrible planner**." For more painterly cards, editor Ria Misra recommends **Red Cap Cards**, which works with several artists and offers unique designs (tip: if you buy boxed sets, they're cheaper than individual orders). Producer Erin Moore also recommends **this boxed set from Egg Press**, if your recipient could benefit from well-meaning crabs, cats, and koalas.

If you'd rather avoid contact with card stores and post offices during the pandemic, Postable prints, addresses, and mails letters for you. I used the service while recovering from a foot injury that briefly had me on crutches, and had a hard time picking from Postable's huge collection of beautiful cards. And if you still can't find the exact image you want, the service also allows you to upload your own pictures for a custom card.

Avoid assumptions

It's a natural impulse to try to relate to someone when offering comfort, but grief guide and writer Alica Forneret warns that you should "avoid any sort of mirroring or projecting."

"Even if their mom died and your mom died, you don't know what that person is going through," she points out. "Their relationship with their parent might have been different."

Another good rule of thumb, from Snyder Cowan, is to avoid saying "at least": "'At least she lived a long life,' 'At least she's not in any pain.' Don't say he or she is in a 'better place,' [or] 'God wanted her to be with him.' We never know how someone feels."

Keep it short

Brevity is the soul of wit, especially when it comes to condolence notes. As Snyder Cowan points out, "A grieving person isn't going to be able to focus on [anything

lengthy] anyways. A long-winded story isn't helpful. Short sentences wishing the best, or whatever the sentiment is, show that you're there. Two to three sentences is good."

A note of support needs to be only that—a way to show that you're thinking about the recipient. You can ask them later if they'd like to hear your top 10 favorite memories of their grandfather, or why their ex was a lout.

Don't overthink language

How people discuss death and disappointment varies from person to person, but don't worry too much about it. If you know the recipient well, use the language they use. But even if you don't, it's unlikely they'll decry your choice of "divorce" versus "separation," or "died" versus "passed away." Brammer says to just be earnest: "I prize sincerity over everything else. If you're being real with me and that's the language you use, that's fine."

Likewise, don't overthink how to close a letter. If you love the person, by all means sign it with that—but otherwise, again, it doesn't really matter. "'Sincerely' is fine, it can be 'warmly,' 'fondly,' 'wishing you peace,' something like that," Snyder Cowan says. "And if you're not comfortable, don't have a salutation at the end. Just sign your name after your words."

Practice your note before committing

Unlike an email or a text, there is no backspace button when handwriting a card. Before I write anything on stationery, I always write down my message on a piece of scrap paper. Of course, as Brammer points out, "[The recipient] is not going to go through it with a red pen for grammar issues." But it's better to flounder and scribble and cross things out on a draft than on a $5 card.

Don't expect a response ...

"When you're reaching out to someone, this is about them, not about you. If they choose to respond, great. If they choose not to respond, also great," says Forneret.

... but follow up if it's appropriate

For closer friends or family members, it can be helpful to check in a bit after their initial loss, when the other calls and cards have dried up and they're alone with their grief. Depending on the person, that check-in can look very different, so Forneret recommends asking directly what that person specifically needs. "Figure out what is actually going to be helpful," she says. "Is what they need a joke? Actual condolences and talking about how much you're going to miss the [deceased] person? Or do they need to hear about your life to distract them?" Food is often a good thing to send, as well.

About your guide

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Dorie Chevlen is an associate staff writer from Youngstown, Ohio, now living in New York. She has worked as a copy editor, fact checker, and sandwich maker, but this is probably her favorite gig. Her writing has also been published in Science, Slate, and The Wall Street Journal, among others. She has been called—both flatteringly and not—“a lot.”