

# Grief Etiquette

Sharon Brubaker & Erica Honore

Grief Specialists

Tony ([00:02](#)):

Erica and Sharon are sisters who began a grief journey in 2006, when Erica's 10 year old son, Austin drowned. Together, they participated in a grief education program were so moved by this experience. They studied and became specialists so they could help the broken hearted find recovery. In 2015 tragedy struck the family once again, when Erica's oldest son, Donovan was killed in a motorcycle accident, Erica and Sharon are committed to sharing their experiences of love, loss, and healing through this podcast. Now, your grief specialists, Sharon and Erica,

Sharon ([00:40](#)):

Did you know that there's a thing called grief etiquette? Did you know that there's certain questions that you shouldn't ask? There are certain things that you shouldn't say there's certain things that you should do. I think because we don't talk about grief. We stray far from talking about grief etiquette, and we go with our gut. We go with what we've seen other people do in the past. We go with what we feel is the right thing. And we're here to tell you that that could be wrong. What you can be doing can be completely inappropriate.

Erica ([01:17](#)):

So true. And it's a high time. We get this information out there because we have so many people, uh, grievers that we're meeting. And they share with us that the terrible things now, not out of malice, but the terrible things that were said to them out of ignorance during their grieving event. And we need to get this message out there so that people can stop tripping over themselves in saying the wrong things at the wrong time.

Sharon ([01:46](#)):

So let's just go into it. You have someone that's died by suicide and it is human nature for us to want to know why, how, what it's human nature. What is it appropriate for you to ask those questions?

Erica ([02:08](#)):

I don't know. I'm on the fence. I think, I think it absolutely timing is everything. Um, the, the situation, if you're one-on-one and you're having a real dialogue, a real, um, open heart and the person who has experienced the loss is truly sharing. And there's a comfort level. There you have a trust. You, you have to do it in an ultimately your goal is making sure they feel safe in that moment. And if you're having a real conversation and there's like I said, a trust you can ask, I don't think it's appropriate. If you see someone posting about their tragic event to comment and say, how did he do it? No, not appropriate in that way.

Sharon ([03:00](#)):

100%, Erica, first of all, I want to, it is perfectly okay to ask how a person died. You hear me out on this? My son has just passed away. I might, I lost my son 12 weeks ago. It's okay for you to say, my heart is breaking for you. May I ask how it happened? Why is it okay to say, may I ask how it happened? Because most times grievers don't have anyone to talk to. And also just like my story, people are never have asked about the griever or how they're doing. And when you ask, oh, may I ask how it gives them the opportunity to talk about it. If they wish, if they wish, if you're the teller at a bank, don't ask that question because the griever's uncle want to talk about it standing in line at your bank. But if you're meeting in the doctor's office and you're both sitting in the waiting room and you guys are having a

conversation, maybe appropriate for you to ask there right .Grievers are dying to tell their story, they're dying to feel heard. So when you ask, may I ask how your son died? Or what happened? May I ask what happened? It gives them the opportunity to talk that, and they may have not talked about it in forever. Right? And so yes, I would say, yes, it is. Okay. Crying, deeper and deeper and deeper is not okay. Here's the other thing I want to give you guys this advice. Please hear me out. When I say this, it is the most golden rule that I can give you, ask the person the child's name first, ask the name. So when the griever says to you, you're sitting in the doctor's office and she said, well, I just lost my son 12 weeks ago. Oh, put your hand over your heart. That lets her know. You feel the pain feeling her pain. My heart is breaking for you. May I ask what was his name? That to me is more important than asking what happened. You're now drawn them in. I've had women, men cry when I've asked the name of their loved one, because no one's ever asked by human nature. We want to hear all the dirt and the ugly. And so we go there, but asking the name puts you both on an equal playing field and lets her know you're open to hearing the story.

Erica ([05:28](#)):

And you're creating the safe space. You're showing interest and empathy and you're creating the safe space where they won't feel uncomfortable sharing their story. And what happened with you if you just go into, um, oh, that's so sad. I'm so sorry. My aunt just died too. You've ruined it. You, you you've thrown in something you've made and made it about you and your you've cut them off from being in the moment and being able to share.

Sharon ([06:02](#)):

Right. So, um, it turns the whole thing all about you. It turns the whole conversation. When you ask it specifically, um, when you, uh, this I've seen this work really well when there's been a stillbirth or a baby has died. Like people are just like, oh, well you can have another baby. And so they move on. But guess what? That baby has a name that baby has a personality. It has a personality for the griever. Oh my, did you get a chance to name your baby? What did you name him? Do you, you don't know what that does. That question right there is so healing for the griever. So healing for the griever, um, in this age of mental health that we're dealing with and we're having the conversations about mental health, we're also having the conversation about suicide. This comes up a lot, Erica, where people want to know what they did, how they did it, why they did it. Right? And so one of the things that we've seen over the last few years, probably you have seen it even longer because we've been in this round for longer. They're trying to change the terminology of death by suicide. I'm sorry. Um, committed suicide to death by suicide. And a lot of times people will say, why are you, why is that appropriate? Why are you using death by suicide? Because when someone is so down in the dumps and they feel that there's nowhere for them to go and their mental illness has taken over and they feel the only way out is by suicide. We put the onus on them. We put the pain of what they were going through. When we say they committed. It's almost as if they committed a crime and we're blaming them. You commit a crime. When you go in and Rob a bank, you choose death. When you take your own life because you want out of the pain so much.

Erica ([08:01](#)):

And there's such a stigma associated with death by suicide. I feel like the surviving family members do not get the grace that are given to people who had, um, you know, died accidentally. It's sad because they then as surviving family members automatically feel guarded and they don't feel as though they can share anything because of the negative stigma associated with someone who dies by suicide. And it's important that we do away with that. Way back when we were young, I mean, it was, they were so

few and far between, I didn't know of any stories, personal stories of people in our extended family or group of someone who died by suicide. Now it's becoming more and more common where we're hearing about it a lot more and people are talking about it more. So we need to give the surviving family, the respect that they deserve. They did not cause this. Cause I feel like there's some underlying, um, notion that the family close family members had something to do, or they could've caught, stopped it or caused it. You know what I'm saying? The way that people approach them and talk. So I feel like if we just extend them the same grace, we would anyone else and not talk to them in a way that's accusatory or blaming.

Sharon ([09:33](#)):

Absolutely. Yeah. I agree with you. Well, the CDC says that about 54% of the people that die by suicide are, have undiagnosed mental illnesses. They have undiagnosed mental illnesses because we don't talk about mental illness from talking about the mental illness or the fears or the ugly thoughts that come up in our brain. Here's the other thing that we need to remember is that when someone chooses death by suicide, it's more than one thing. It's not typically one thing. It's not typically my third grade teacher saying, calling me fat, then brought us to this point. It's multiple things. So to have someone answer the question of why, or even this, how could they have done this? How could they have done this to you? How could they have left all their kids behind? How, how, how, first of all, it's none of your business, but second of all, it's so many things that bring it together, bring it to that point. It's hard for the breathing families.

Erica ([10:44](#)):

And I think, excuse me, the family is already going through that themselves. They don't need to hear it from you.

Sharon ([10:52](#)):

Yeah. Yeah. One of the other things you can't ask, I don't think you should ask, this should be shared. Just like you said, you set up an intimate moment between two friends talking about their loss. This should be staying with them. The parts that she or he wants to discuss, stay there, right? You asking, did they leave a note is none of your damn business, because if they left a note, if they didn't leave the note for you, then it's none of your business. Because we also know that a majority of, uh, grievors that die by suicide, don't read notes, right? That's number one, number two, how they actually did it is none of your business either. Unless the person wants to share it with you openly, it's none of your business. So go into a different part of the conversation and create the safe place. Ask them their name, ask how they're feeling. Ask about the griever, talk about their heart, have a conversation about feelings and let them be open to share. Because a lot of times when we're dealing with death by suicide to grievors, haven't even verbalized even one time what happened.

Erica ([12:04](#)):

And that is so hard because you you've already explained grievors need to talk and they want to share. So if they're not even able to verbalize what happened in the most, uh, minute detail, just, um, you know, Donovan died. They can't even say that they can't get that to that point, let alone say, you know, if, if I were that, that surviving family member Donovan died by suicide, you know, there's healing power in being able to speak your truth and saying things, uh, the reality of what has happened. And when you're holding that back and holding pieces back, it's hard for you to get on your path to healing

because you're not even able to be in a safe space to say, what has really occurred and speak from your heart.

Sharon ([13:00](#)):

I think one of the bravest things that happened to us after Austin died was that Louis walked in the door and refused to not have a speaker's name. He was like, we're to, this is my son. And we're going to talk about the son, my son. And so he really led us and guide us in that way and how we totally healed as a family from grief. And I think the beginning stuff for that healing process was Louis doing that. You have to follow the lead of the griever. You have to follow the leader, the griever. Now this is different to say, if you actually have a griever and they're not talking about it at all, you know, you can softly and gently pull it out. But if the grieving family are really talking about the person and using their name, share some of your own memories of them, share some of your own stories of that, it does feel good. It's perfectly okay to talk about the person that has died to the griever.

Erica ([13:59](#)):

It absolutely is. And I think that is another piece that needs to be put out there. People will say, oh, I wanted to tell you this great story, but I didn't want to make you feel bad. We already feel bad. We're already set. Our hearts are broken, hearing a beautiful memory that you experienced with our child, husband, grandfather, whoever is not going to make it more painful. It's actually going to, for me personally, when I heard all the stories about Donovan, it made me feel happy that he was exactly the young man that I was raising him to be. And it brought me joy and made my heart smile. So know that that's what you're giving to the griever. You're letting them know that person that they loved and cherished was exactly who you wanted them to be and believe them to be. They were carrying that out into the world. And that's a beautiful gift to give someone as a survivor.

Sharon ([15:06](#)):

Okay. Here's another golden rule that I want to add to this. It is perfectly okay. If you feel in a safe place with a stranger that you've just met to ask what happened. Of course, we should ease into that and creating that safe place by asking the name. A lot of times, people don't want to ask what happened because they feel they're going to trigger the griever. But think about this. It was months and days and weeks before anybody asks me about me, I wasn't getting to talk about Austin. People were asking about Erica. They were asking about Louis, but they weren't asking about me or how I was doing some of the advice out there is don't ask. And I completely disagree with that. I believe that we should create a safe place. And when appropriate, we should ask, do you mind sharing with me? What happened? Do you mind sharing with me how your loved one died? Here's the golden rule. Grievers. You have the right to say, no, you don't have to share if your heart is not there today. And you know, you got business and you can't cry right now, or you just want don't want to go there or they haven't created a safe place. It is absolutely okay for you to say, I don't feel like talking about that right now, but maybe some other time, or right now it's not appropriate for me. I have a long day or no, no. With a complete sentence.

Erica ([16:31](#)):

Yeah. You know, and, and grievers can tell if you are genuine or not, they can tell. So if you're coming in with a phony intention, just to get information, they're going to be able to tell, and they're going to hopefully shut it down. Hopefully they are not putting themselves in a vulnerable position of opening them up. Even though they don't feel the safe space. My grieving friends do not share if you don't feel like you're in a safe space because, you know, trust your instincts, go with your gut. You can tell if

someone is just one asking out of courtesy and doesn't really give two shakes, whether or not, you know, you share your story, you know, trust your instinct and say, I don't, I don't feel like talking about it right now. That is absolutely right. Your prerogative, you earned it own it.

Sharon ([17:21](#)):

Thank you for asking no, um, stop saying things that you don't mean to the group or that aren't true. Like, for example, don't say I'm praying for you. If you're not really going to be praying for them, don't say that it doesn't make us feel better. No. When you tell someone, when you tell them, we're not praying for you, that's about you. That's not about them. Right.

Erica ([17:50](#)):

That's true. That is so true. I mean, and, and there's things that you can do. Like, um, there are little sweetheart and felt little prayers, you know what I mean? You had said that, like I said, this for you this morning, you know, and a message. Send it in a text. That's more personal than just, uh, yeah. Don't comment on my faith. My picture that I've put up. If I do a heartfelt something and say I'm with the praying hands. Yeah. That means nothing. Send me something personal.

Sharon ([18:20](#)):

Okay. So first of all, I'll help you with that. Those are not praying hands they're high five they're high-fiving but it, I was praying in, yeah. I actually had a griever do the research on that. She's she told me she was, these are not praying hands. They're doing a high five, but people think it's praying hands and they suck.

Erica ([18:40](#)):

It's wearing like a blue robe. And to me, that looks like I attributed to church.

Sharon ([18:46](#)):

Oh, oh. Like the altar boys. Okay. I see you're Catholic coming on that. Okay. Um, do say something like I'm sending you healing energy. My heart hurts for you and your family right now. I think that that is so much more genuine than I'm praying for you.

Erica ([19:04](#)):

Right. Right. And I like, even, cause I have said this, like, you know, I pray that Jesus will wrap his loving arms of comfort around you or something like that because that's what the griever's need. They need comfort and strength. I'm praying for strength that you can get through this. Something, something personal, not just, I'm praying for you with the little emoji. Cause yeah. That means nothing.

Sharon ([19:24](#)):

Yeah. Yeah. Um, well, you know, um, Donovan's in a better place. Don't say that that's completely against the etiquette rules. You don't, first of all, you don't know that to be true. Second of all, why are you saying that? Third of all. What if they don't believe in God or heaven and that's not where they're at.

Erica ([19:49](#)):

Right.

Sharon ([19:50](#)):

We don't know that Donovan's in a better place.

Erica ([19:53](#)):

Well, but what about you have an angel now you have an angel looking over you.

Sharon ([19:58](#)):

Yeah. Yeah, yeah. What about

Erica ([20:01](#)):

I personally didn't need any more angels? I preferred mine to be, you know, here in my kitchen, giving me a hard time, harassing me saying stupid things. That's how I prefer my angels to be here. I don't want them. I don't need any more.

Sharon ([20:18](#)):

Uh, what about, um, well at least he's not suffering anymore. We got that a lot with daddy. Cause he was sick.

Erica ([20:26](#)):

And you know, that's, that's factual. You're right. But does that bring comfort? No.

Sharon ([20:32](#)):

Yeah, yeah. It's it absolutely doesn't bring comfort. I think that we need to read the room a little better when it comes to grief, but we also need to keep having these conversations so that we know what to say and what to do, there is an etiquette when it comes to grief and there's something that we, as the supporting staff and family around the grievers should know what to do and what not to do. We just did our show on, uh, on humor. And it's absolutely okay to make a joke too, is if it's appropriate with that family, you know what I mean? Your grandmother just lost her husband and she's got the stip up her neck and she's the librarian. You probably don't want to go in there making jokes.

Erica ([21:15](#)):

Yeah. I don't think granny's is going to receive that very well, but there, yeah, it, depending on the, and you know, I mean, if you have a close relationship with that family, you know, whether or not they're going to receive humor well, or if it's going to be offensive to them and if you don't know whether or not, then that means don't do it because you're not that close with them.

Sharon ([21:37](#)):

Yeah. Exactly. Then don't absolutely don't do. I think some of the things that stand out more to the griever is all of the things that were inappropriately set. They never forget those. They never forget those, those stand out forever. And they forever look at that person. And remember that comment.

Erica ([21:58](#)):

Next month will be 16, 15 years since Donovan, uh, Austin died. And I still remember all the inappropriate things that happened that week leading up to his funeral and you're right. I have not let it go.

Sharon ([22:16](#)):

Maybe that's something you need to work on in your life.

Erica ([22:19](#)):

I want to say this. It is absolutely okay for you to say, I don't know what to say. And I have no words.

Sharon ([22:27](#)):

There are no words.

Erica ([22:28](#)):

That is completely appropriate and it is received as so genuine.

Sharon ([22:34](#)):

It's absolutely also okay for you to break down and cry. As they're telling their story, it is 100%. I can't even tell you guys how many times I'm sitting with a griever and the tears just start to flow. And we let them know ahead of time. We may or may not cry during your grief story. And it has, it's our outward sign of our love and our feeling what's going on in our heart for your loved one. It's absolutely okay. Some people feel like they can't cry with the griever because they're going to make them feel worse. The truth is they probably want to know that you're still thinking about their loved one. I want to know yourself thinking about Donovan and you're still out there with him.

Erica ([23:16](#)):

Yeah, that is true. It definitely, um, gives them a sense of comfort and, and it brings across your authenticity because you're allowing yourself to be in a vulnerable position while you're sharing with them.

Sharon ([23:33](#)):

Friends. It would never hurt to send a note of condolence ever. Even if you didn't know the person, even if it's a coworker's grandmother that you are so far removed from, but to send a note of condolence to them or a loving, um, passage to them is absolutely okay.

Erica ([23:52](#)):

If you don't know if something should be said, don't say it. Don't say it. Just sit on it. Just remember the griever is, um, has heightened sensitivity to everything going on around them. And if you say something that could be triggering to them, like Sharon said, they're never going to forget it. So just err on the side of caution and don't say it if you're not sure you should.

Sharon ([24:21](#)):

Um, do you feel that for every note of condolence and should be a thank you note in return.

Erica ([24:31](#)):



So for like all the cards that I have to spend a thank you card. Yeah. So I personally

Sharon ([24:39](#)):

I think that's a whole show, so don't buy too.

Erica ([24:41](#)):

Wait, I'm not going to go too deep. I'm going to just share my perspective on thank you cards because we were raised in the generation of sending them out. Our mother never let an occasion go by where we didn't send out a thank you card. I, for one think, if you get married, your guests should send you thank you cards because you invited them to a party where they got free food and alcohol. You should be receiving the thank you card. So that's my same perspective on the funeral. I think it's a lot to put on the griever to expect that they respond to each and every person that reaches out to them because they have griever's brain. They're still in a fog and they can't believe that this terrible tragedy has occurred in their life. So to put another layer and expect them to send you out a thank you card, I think it's a bit much. Yeah. That's my personal perspective.

Sharon ([25:29](#)):

I agree with you on that. What about respecting the customs and tradition of that family and how they choose to grieve the person it's us as outside looking in, just because we wouldn't have done it that way. Like some people choose not to have a funeral and that offend so many people around when, in actuality, the funerals for the living, right? Uh, when they're choosing the tradition that they want to go with, we need to be respectful of that.

Erica ([25:58](#)):

Absolutely. It's their, it's their life. It's their family member, spouse, significant other to do with, how will they feel they need? Now that doesn't stop. So, you know, we know, and we've worked with a lot of people where there's a lot of discord in the family and they can't agree on something. So then the person that does have the control, the spouse or whoever, and doesn't want to do it, you have to respect that because you don't have a choice, but that doesn't mean you can't have your own private memorial. If you want with your friends and your loved ones, if that's something that you need, you absolutely can. You do not have to invite the one that's choosing not to have a funeral. You can do your own private service with those close to you and let them hold your space and go through the process that you need to go through.

Sharon ([26:50](#)):

I think one of the other things you should never say to a griever is what can I do for you? They don't know. They don't know what you can do for them. Their brain is gone. They can't think beyond that. So I think instead of saying, what can I do for you? I think it's perfectly okay to say, Hey, for the next two months, I'm going to put your trash cans out on Tuesday or to show up on Tuesday. I take the trash cans out, right? They all know what they need. And so you just got to get in there and do some other things. Don't overstep your bounds. I mean, don't start planning the color for the funeral, but there are things that you can do to help.

Erica ([27:32](#)):

They are not going to ask you. They're not going to ask you for anything. Even if you reach out and are offering, they're not going to ask. So, and they're going to isolate because they feel me personally. I felt

no one could understand my pain. So I'd rather just be by myself than to try and be around a group of people. People that I thought did not know how bad I felt. So that being said, don't stop texting them and inviting them to things, understand that there's going to be a time period that they just need to themselves. And they don't feel like being in the company of others, but don't give up on them. Don't stop reaching out because they, they like that. You're still including them. And eventually they're going to get to a place where they're going to accept the offer to lunch, but until they do just keep inviting them.

Sharon ([28:24](#)):

So, um, I just want to know, do you think it's appropriate to say, oh my God, did they have life insurance?

Erica ([28:31](#)):

Absolutely not.

Sharon ([28:37](#)):

I guess it's none of your business that's to be handled in the intimate conversations. The ones that are closest to them, we'll discuss that and what needs to go on. But people will ask that they absolutely will ask that 100%. Um, can you say, well, you know, everything happens for a reason.

Erica ([29:00](#)):

No, not in the beginning. That message is received after someone has, has, uh, had some healing work or, you know, cause no one wants to hear that. No one wants to hear that the person that they loved and shares that has been taken from them happened for a reason. Because in that moment you can't see a reason of them not being another minute in your life.

Sharon ([29:23](#)):

I think one of the worst things that we can tell somebody is that we know how they feel. Girl, I know exactly how you feel. My grandmother died 10 years ago and I still hadn't gotten over that. I don't know why we do that, but we just feel like we have to be on the same playing field for them. Right. Sometimes I feel so awkward with that. Like I'll say, well for me when Austin, died, or for me when Donovan died, I'll say for me, letting them know, I'm not trying to compare my loss to theirs at all.

Erica ([29:55](#)):

Yeah. That is the most disrespectful thing you can say to a griever. I would never say to another mother who lost a child. I know how you feel. I don't, I didn't know their child. I didn't know the relationship they had with that child. There's no way for me to know how they feel. I know how I feel, how I felt and what it was like for me in the days and weeks following. But I won't know. I would never be able to say, I know for certain how someone else feels.

Sharon ([30:22](#)):

Keep in mind friends that a grieving experience is a personal and intimate experience for the griever. It's a part of their journey. And it's theirs is theirs to be had. And it's theirs to walk. It has nothing to do with you. So stay out of it and be supportive alongside them. Right. They will let you in on as much as they want to let you in on. And they will release as much as they want to release around you. But don't get

offended if they're not pulling you in. They're still trying to figure this out. We have to remember that always.

Erica ([30:58](#)):

Yeah. Yeah. I think that is so important because like you said, there's so many things happening to the griever. They got fogged, foggy grief brain. They're in shock. They're just trying to make sense of everything. They're scared of what their future is going to look like without that person in it understand that they are going through so many things from minute to minute that you probably couldn't even fathom unless you were actually inside their body. So give them, give them, uh, cut them some slack, give them a break and don't give up on them.

Sharon ([31:33](#)):

So here's what we want you to know. We're going to leave you with these three, three things. Number one, there is absolutely grief etiquette, and you need to know what it is. You absolutely need to know. And if you don't know the answer to what is appropriate, ask somebody, okay. Before you go and stick your foot in your mouth. Number two. Know, that saying, I don't know what to say is absolutely. Okay. That's the thing. If you don't know what to say, don't try to fill in the blank. Just say those words. There are no words. I don't know what to say. Number three. Know, that just sitting next to the griever without talking is absolutely. Okay. If you keep these three things in mind, you're probably not going to mess up or say an inappro, make an inappropriate comment. Just keeping those three things in mind. Here's the other thing we answer questions all day long and we would gladly answer a question for you. You can reach out to us on our email at [sisters@healingstartswiththeheart](mailto:sisters@healingstartswiththeheart) on our Facebook group. And healing starts with the heart. You can email us privately. Um, and we will answer any question that you need to help you and how to help your grieving friends.

Erica ([32:48](#)):

Thank you guys for listening today. This is an extremely important message to get out there. And like Sharon said, don't hesitate to reach out with your questions. Bye friends.

Sharon ([32:58](#)):

Bye.

Erica ([32:59](#)):

Hi friends, Erica Andre here with healing starts with the heart. Sharon and I are so glad you joined us for another great episode of our podcast. We hope you enjoyed this episode. We want to let you know for more information you can go to our website at [healingstartswiththeheart.com](http://healingstartswiththeheart.com). There you will find not only today's podcast, but all of our podcasts, along with our blogs. The information on the programs that we offer and the grievers guide, which is something Sharon and I put together to document how we came to be your grief specialists. We also have a quiz to take, to identify if you are truly grieving. And if you want to talk specifically with either Sharon or myself, you can schedule an appointment there. You will also find a place to join our private Facebook group at hope, heal, and recover. Thank you so much for being with us. Have a great day friends.