

# How to Comfort Someone: 15 Do's & Don'ts

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How do you comfort someone when they tell you they have cancer, when they cry or when they despair for losing their job?

What do you say or do?

If you have ever been in such a situation, or if you wonder what you should do, this article is for you.

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## #1. Listen & Let Them Talk

Understand this:

We are social animals.

And oftentimes one of the reasons people feel bad about bad news is not just the bad news in itself, but having to face their social circle with it.

Indeed, people loath judgement and questioning from inept friends.

Spare your friends the judgmental, disapproving, disappointed and questioning tone.

Surprise your friend with some emotional intelligence, instead.

To begin with, ask fewer questions in the beginning and let them volunteer information.

As a matter of fact, help them volunteer information:

**Friend:** Everyone is blaming me for our break up and my family just can't let it go. I didn't leave him and I do feel bad he's taking it so poorly. I wish we could have stayed together, but we were just too different

**You:** Too different?

**Friend:** Yes, I wanted adventure and variety, but he... Bla bla bla

Asking “what are people blaming you for” would put her in a bad defensive mood. Another mistake here would have been to truncate the conversation before she’s had a chance to “exculpate herself”.

Let her make her case from an affirmative, positive place, without pushing her on the defensive, which is what everyone else is doing.

## **#2. Use Open Ended Questions**

Open ended question allow people the freedom to choose what to say. It gives a feeling of being appreciated for who they are.

| **Friend:** And the owner evicted me

The mistake here would be to ask:

| **You didn’t pay rent?**

That would put your friend on the defensive. If he didn’t pay rent now he needs to say “no I didn’t, *but* it was because bla bla bla”.

Instead, you say:

| **You:** How come...

| **Friend:** I was going through a very rough patch back then..

| **You:** I see. And how are you doing now...

| **Friend:** much better! Bla bla bla...

If they are done telling their story the question is great because it allows them to go from “bad situation” to positive, which is exactly what you want.

## **#3. Give Space and Time: Don’t Rush Solutions**

Giving space and time means:

- Listen
- Accept silences
- Let them cry / be angry / complain

And it means that you:

- Don’t force them to “see the positives” too quickly
- Don’t tell them how “it’s going to be better” too quickly
- Don’t tell them how to fix it too quickly (most likely they’re not ready for the solution)

Don’t rush your solutions and don’t minimize their pain.

Give them instead space to be sad, silent or even cry.

**It’s most effective to change the state of crying people with light banter**, smiling and positivity.

But that’s the mentality that you must fix it for them, and that’s not always the case (especially in relationships).

The option I like most these days is to stay present and near. Maybe rub their shoulder and back a little

bit, as if to say “it will be OK”.

The idea you want to give is that “*I’m here for you... As soon as you are ready. But take your time*“. Crying is actually often therapeutic, so don’t sweat it too much.

#### **#4. Help Save Face: Mention Your Troubles**

Sometimes people feel bad for a blunder or a particularly [embarrassing situation](#).

An easy way to smooth out the transition from embarrassment to opening up (or to a laugh) is to share similar stories that happened to you.

**Friend:** To be honest, it went bad as I involuntary emitted gas and couldn’t recover from there (cheeks getting red)

**You:** Damn, I can imagine. I remember when I once involuntary burped in front of the whole class. God, I wanted to disappear

**Friend:** Burping is OK.... I farted!

**You:** LOL, but you should have heard *my* burp. Godzilla and King Kong should merge into a single entity to reach half of that resonance

**Friend:** Ahaha (now she’s already off the hook, back to normal)

Sharing your similar troubles helps to “normalize” any situation and your friend won’t feel anymore dumb or isolated.

#### **#5. Criticize Their Critics First**

This is real next level social finesse.

If someone has been fired, rejected or harshly criticized, they find themselves between a rock (their ego) and a hard place (their social circle).

If they criticize their own critics, they look like they are complaining and that they are butthurt.

However, and here is the catch, when we *don’t* criticize those who refused us it feels like endorsing or justifying them, which is the equivalent of saying “indeed, I *do* suck and deserve their rejection”.

So there they are, mumbling some BS like “it’s ok to receive criticism”, “it’s great feedback” or, a bit better, “you can’t appease everyone”.

Help them out from that mental catch 22 and they’ll love you for it. Here’s how you do it:

**Friend:** Carl broke up with me

**You:** I’m sorry and I’m glad you seem OK. Can I be honest now? That guy was an asshole, how did you manage to stay together until now

**Friend:** God yes! Listen to what he did... Bla bla bla

Or:

**Friend:** No, that job thing didn’t work out (embarrassed about it)

**You:** Mate, what the f\*ck were you even doing with those amateurs. I’ve heard that guy there, what’s his name, the sloppiest of the bunch, he burned through 3 millions without getting a single client! Is that true.

**Friend:** Bro, you can’t even imagine how sloppy they are, bla bla bla

**You:** Idiots! When are you joining us now

When you attack the people that took value away from your friends you show you're on their side. And second and most important, you give them permission to let their anger out and be really frank about what they think.

Now that's real bonding!

After they're done venting, they might even turn around and admit their mistakes.

At that point -and only at that point!- it will be sincere.

## #6. Say You're Sorry

For anything you can do little about, like [loss in the family](#) or illnesses, these two little words are your stock answer:

| I'm sorry

Then, depending on how they look like or how fresh the loss is, you can add:

| And how are you now

If the loss is fresh and obviously painful you don't want to ask "how are you". At that point you can add:

| Man, I can imagine it must be hard. I want you to know that whenever you feel like, I am here for you. When you need to take your mind off, have a blast or simply just talk about it, I am here.

Then let them decide whether they want to continue the interaction now or at another time.

## What to Avoid

I don't know how your own experience is so far, but in my case, it feels like more people do it wrong than right.

Here are the most common mistakes when it comes to consoling someone or helping them out:

### 1. Using Their Pain to Troubleshoot

This happens whenever we want to make sure that we our save. Our questions aim to relieve ourselves instead of supporting our friend:

| **You:** I lost all my files in my computer. Weeks and weeks of work, I feel like crying  
| **Clueless:** Argh, how could that happen, didn't you connect your computer to Dropbox  
| **You:** no, otherwise I could recover them now  
| **Clueless:** oh good, because I have Dropbox and was getting worried, feeew

This is a bit exaggerated to make my point.

Most people would move back to you *after* they troubleshoot for themselves.

But granted, there are also many who are really *that* clueless like in the example.

## **2. I told You! And what did I tell you?**

Few things are as annoying as the friend who always saw your problems coming long before they materialized.

And his close brother: the friend who warned you in advance.

A special place in hell belongs to those who didn't even warn you, but still say it anyway, just to make you feel even worse (this is a power move, BTW).

See a funny example from Family Guy:

## **3. Assigning Blame**

And here comes the “you must have done something wrong” type of friend:

**You:** I just didn't make it on time to break and rear-ended him. I have troubles moving my neck now and I'm even out several thousands. Sheeet!

**Clueless:** Yes, but were you wearing the seat belts?

**You:** Yes, but the airbag didn't go off

**Clueless:** Oh, I see, you didn't do the regular inspection did you?

You can see clueless here is more intent in assigning blame than supporting.

Some people do it because they refuse to accept that there is also a lot of randomness in life. You can't control everything and assure safety.

Living entail risks. Even when you do everything right. Make your peace with it.

## **4. Endless Loop Questions**

I still remember this one like it was yesterday. I was traveling, had slept very little and was having some stomach flu because of some bad food I had.

This is what Deborah thought would help:

**Me:** I'm not feeling too well, I might have some light food poisoning

**Deborah:** You are sick? Why are you sick... You shouldn't be sick

**Me:** ....

Those are not real questions.

Asking “why are you sick” puts the onus on them to explain, again, why they are not well. That's an endless loop question: there is no answer more than “ate some bad food”.

And the icing on the cake is: “you shouldn't be sick”, which made me feel as if I needed to justify myself for having chosen to get food poison.

## **5. Saying they “had it all” (before their mistake)**

I remember years ago I was working a goodish company in a good position. And of course, like all conservative parents, my parents weren't happy to see me leave big corp.

I was having some issues finding a new job and this is how it went:

**Me:** I've been sending applications. It's not as easy as I thought though..

**Dad:** (highly complaining tone) Oh dammit, but you had a good job  
(implies I made a mistake not holding onto it)

**Me:** (eye-roll)

Another one could be:

**You:** All the good guys are married, all the attractive ones are players and all the single ones are gays

**Clueless:** What about your ex, he was a good guy, you two were good, why did you leave him

In this second example Clueless is forcing you to explain yourself and re-defend your choice. Chances are you won't stay good friends for long like that.

## 6. Making Light of It

Trying to relieve them of their pain too early is another common mistake.

People will get better, but they don't wanna hear you telling them. Or at least, not so soon.

It makes people feel like you're not appreciating their difficulties and that you think they are being weak.

And don't ever say "it could have been X":

## 7. Fixing It

[John Gray](#) calls men "mr. Fix it".

And he is not wrong: it's often men who fall for the "I need to fix their problem" attitude.

But when you think you can fix their problems in two seconds you are actually saying that you think they're incompetent.

And they might be incompetent! But people still don't want you to make them feel that way (read [How to Win Friends](#)).

I have a friend who always does it:

**Clueless:** and what did I tell you? Now this is what you do. You go there and tell him X,Y,Z

**Me:** Hmm that's not a bad idea (mental note: last time I talk to this guy)

Fixing people's issue is patronizing AF. It doesn't make you come across as more incompetent. It makes you come across as socially inept.

## 8. "Oh My God" Reactions

"Oh my God reactions" are exaggerated reactions to bad news.

Look at this example:

**You:** no, Frank won't be coming tonight because we are not together anymore

**Clueless:** oh myyy God!! are you serious??

**You:** yes... (A bit peeved, doesn't know what to add) it was consensual

**Clueless:** but you were such a great couple!!

**You:** Well, it looked like, but..

**Clueless:** How did *that* happen!!

**You:** (look around, then loud) is there are any other seat available? I'd like to move

You will notice here that the "Oh my God" reaction is coupled with way too many questions that push you into defending yourself and your decision.

People facing difficult times need support, not a barrage of questions that makes it harder for them.

## 9. Empty Platitudes

Please avoid any of the following platitudes:

- Everything happens for a reason
- What doesn't break you make you stronger!
- It's always darkest before sunrise. You'll be happy this happened

And anything God or destiny related:

- God doesn't give anything to those who can't handle it
- It's in God's plan

Trust me, even the most God fearing person would be hard pushed not to tell you where to put your God's platitudes.

## SUMMARY

Comforting someone when they're feeling down is an important skill in the social master's arsenal.

This article, inspired by the wonderful book [There Is no Good Card for This](#), taught how to properly console and support a friend.

Once you have listened and let them off the hook, then you can start moving towards a more positive attitude.

And we will focus on that in the next post.

Also read:

- [Rescuing friends from socially awkward situations](#)
- [Defending friends from social assault](#)

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