

FAST FACTS AND CONCEPTS #22 WRITING A CONDOLENCE LETTER

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Introduction One of the most meaningful acts of kindness you can do for a mourner is to write a letter of condolence. The words of sympathy and memory are comforting to the bereaved. More importantly, mourners are very appreciative that you took the time to sit and compose a personal message to them or share a memory of the deceased. For professionals who work with dying patients, writing a condolence letter is an opportunity to reflect on both the pain and the rewards of our work. When we can appreciate the privilege it is to bear witness to the courage, kindness, caring and dignity that our patients and their families exhibit under duress, it gives us strength to continue this work.

A good condolence letter has two goals: to offer tribute to the deceased and to be a source of comfort to the survivors. The best letters are like conversations, as if you were talking during a visit. Most often, they are written to the bereaved person to whom you feel closest, although it could be a general letter to the family. It should be written and sent promptly, generally within two weeks after the death. Use any standard stationery and write it by hand. Here are some specific guidelines for writing a good condolence letter:

- **Acknowledge the loss and name the deceased.** This sets the purpose and tone of the letter. Let the bereaved know how you learned of the death and how you felt upon hearing the news. Using the name of the deceased is a tribute that comforts most mourners.
- **Express your sympathy.** Use words of sympathy that remind the bereaved that they are not alone in their feelings of sadness and loss.
- **Note special qualities of the deceased.** Acknowledge those characteristics that you cherished most about the person who has died. These might be qualities of personality (courage, sensitivity), or attributes (funny, affable), or ways the person related to the world (religious, devoted to community welfare).
- **Recall a memory about the deceased.** Talk about how the deceased touched your life. Try to capture what it was about the person in the story that you admired, appreciated or respected. You may use humor – the funny stories are often the most appreciated by the bereaved.
- **Remind the bereaved of their personal strengths.** Bereavement often brings with it self-doubt and anxiety about one's own personal worth. By reminding the bereaved of the qualities they possess that will help them through this period, you reinforce their ability to cope. Qualities to mention might be patience, optimism, religious belief, resilience, and competence. If you can recall something the deceased used to say about the mourner in this regard, you will really be giving the bereaved a gift. An example: *“I was (impressed, inspired, awed, strengthened) by the devotion you and your family evidenced during the period of Mort’s illness. Your presence (concern, care, attentiveness) was only one indication of your love for him.”*
- **Offer help, but be specific.** *“If there is anything I can do, please call”* actually puts a burden on those in grief who may be totally at a loss about what needs to be done. A definite offer of help is more appreciated. Whatever you offer, do it – don't make an offer you cannot fulfill.
- **End with a word or phrase of sympathy.** Somehow, “sincerely,” “love,” or “fondly,” don't quite make it. Try one of these: *“You are in my thoughts and prayers.”* Or, *“My fond respects to you and yours.”*

If you don't have enough to say for a formal condolence letter, you may prefer to send a sympathy note. These are shorter communications that can be written on personal stationery or added to a commercially available card. As with a condolence letter, the major goal is to offer a tribute to the deceased and to offer

comfort to the bereaved.

Reference

Wolfson, R. *A Time to Mourn, A Time to Comfort*. Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing; 1993: pp 223-226.

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