

# Letters of Sympathy

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*A good letter of condolence is like a handclasp, warm and friendly.*

-LILLIANEICHLER WATSON

Letters of condolence and sympathy are some of the most difficult to write. People who are shocked and saddened and who feel inadequate and tongue-tied are writing to people who are grief-stricken and vulnerable and who feel life is hardly "worth living.

However painful they are to write, letters of sympathy are imperative if you have a personal or business relationship with the deceased's family or friends. It will not be easy for them to overlook your ignoring something as all-important as the death of a loved one.

Condolences are offered only in the event of a death; sympathy may be expressed for a death., but it is also extended to those who have suffered from a fire, flood, storm, or natural disaster; burglary, theft, or violent crime; a lost job, bankruptcy, personal reverses, or other misfortunes.

## Send Letters of Sympathy in Cases of

- \* absence of a superior who would normally respond
- \* anniversary of a death (see also ANNIVERSARIES)
- \* death of a family member of friend/neighbor/relative/customer/  
client/employee/colleague
- \* death of an employee (write to next of kin)
- \* death of a pet
- \* divorce
- \* hospitalization due to serious illness or accident (see also "GET WELL")

- \* miscarriage or stillbirth
- \* misfortune: loss of job/bankruptcy/burglary/violent crime
- \* natural disaster: flood/hurricane/drought/storms
- \* terminal illness (see also "GET WELL")



- Simply and directly express your sorrow about the other person's loss or trouble.
- Mention by name the person who died or the unfortunate event.
  - Tell how you heard the news, if appropriate.
  - Express your feelings of grief, dismay, loss.
  - Offer sympathy, thoughts, prayers, good wishes.
- In the case of a death, mention what you liked or loved about the deceased; relate some happy memory, -anecdote, favorite expression, or advice they gave you; mention the virtues, achievements, or successes for which they'll be remembered; tell about something they said or did that touched you. Especially welcome is recalling a complimentary or loving remark made by the deceased about the bereaved person. The more specific you are, the more memorable and comforting your letter will be.
- Close with a general expression of concern or affection or an encouraging reference to the future: "You are in my thoughts and prayers"; "My thoughts are with all of you in this time of sorrow"; "In the days ahead, may you find some small comfort in your many happy memories."

*What  
Not to  
Say*

Don't say too little (sending only a commercial card with your signature) and don't say too much (offering clichés, advice, or inappropriate comments).

Don't use overly dramatic language ("the worst tragedy I ever heard of," "the dreadful, horrible, appalling news"). If you were shocked or appalled at the news, say so—but avoid being excessively sentimental, sensational, or morbid. A simple "I'm sorry" is effective and comforting.

- \* Don't discuss the philosophy of death and disaster or offer religious commentary unless you are certain that sympathy grounded in a shared philosophic or religious orientation is appropriate with this person. Avoid pious clichés, simplistic explanations of the tragedy, or unwarranted readings of God's activities, intents, or involvement.
- \* Don't give advice or encourage big changes (leaving town, moving into an apartment selling the spouse's model ship collection). It's usually many months before survivors can make well-thought-out decisions.
- \* Don't make generic offers of help like "Let me know if I can help," or "Feel free to call on us." This requires a response from people who already have much to deal with; most people will not take you up on such vague invitations. Instead, just do something: bring food, have the dress or suit the person is wearing to the funeral drycleaned, put up out-of-town relatives, watch children for several hours, address acknowledgments, take over work duties for a few days, cut grass or shovel snow or water the garden, help clean the house. If you're not close to the bereaved, an offer of help will be seen for the empty gesture it is. If you are close, you will either know what is helpful or you know whom to ask (friend, neighbor) about what needs doing.
- \* Don't focus on your feelings: "I've been just devastated—I can't seem to keep my mind on anything"; "I start crying every time I think of him"; "Why didn't you call me?" In the chapter entitled, "P.S. Don't tell *me* how bad you feel!" of her best-selling book, *Widow*, Lynn Caine says most of the condolence letters she received were more about the writer's awkwardness, discomfort, and inadequacies than about her sorrow or their shared loss. She says many letters were "full of expressions of how uneasy the writers, felt, how miserable the writers were—as if they expected *me* to comfort *them*." There is a fine line between expressing your sorrow and dramatizing your own reactions.
- \* Don't offer false cheeriness or optimistic platitudes. In a *Reader's Digest* article, "An Etiquette for Grief," Crystal Gromer says, "In the context of grief, clichés are simply bad manners. . . , 'At least he didn't suffer,' people say. 'At least he's not a vegetable.' Any time you hear 'at least' come out of your mouth, stop. Creating an imaginary worse scenario doesn't make the real and current one better. It trivializes it." C.C. Colton once said, "Most of our misfortunes are more supportable than the comments- of our friends upon them." Avoid the following' comments:

Chin up.  
 Be brave.  
 Don't cry.  
 You'll get over it.  
 It's better this way.  
 She is better off now.  
 Time heals all wounds.  
 He was too young to die.  
 Life is for the living.  
 Keep busy, you'll forget.  
 I know just how you feel.  
 God never makes a mistake.  
 Be happy for what you had.  
 He's in a better place now.  
 It's a blessing in disguise.  
 At least she isn't suffering.  
 You must get on with your life.  
 He was old and had a good life.  
 Every cloud has a silver lining.  
 I heard you're not taking it well.

She is out of her misery at- least.  
 Be thankful you have another child.  
 At least you had him for eighteen  
 years.  
 Don't worry, it was probably for  
 the best.  
 I feel almost worse than you do  
 about this. ,  
 God had .a purpose in sending you~  
 this burden.  
 You're young yet; you can always  
 marry again.  
 It's just as well you never got to  
 know the baby.  
 You're not the first person this has  
 happened to.  
 I have a friend who's going through  
 the same thing.  
 God only sends burdens to those  
 who can handle them.  
 Life must go on—you'll feel "better  
 before you know it.

## Tips on Writing

When your condolences are belated, send them anyway. A person can overlook tardiness, but it's almost impossible to overlook being ignored at a time like this.

In most cases, be brief. A lengthy letter may be overwhelming in a time of grief. On the other hand, if your letter is lengthy because you are recounting wonderful memories of the deceased person, it will be comforting and welcome. A letter that is lengthy because it includes other news or because it dwells on your own feelings is not appropriate.

Be tactful, but don't fear being honest— using the word *death* or *suicide*, for example. Circumlocutions like *passed on*, *passed away*, *departed*, *left this life*, *gone to their reward*, *gone to a better life*, *the deceased*, and *the dear departed* are no longer seen very often.

- \* Accept that nothing you write will take away the person's grief, grief that ' is a necessary part of the healing process. Too many people agonize about finding the words that will make everything right again. There simply aren't any.
- \* Observe the fine line between sympathy and pity. Sympathy respects the person's- ability to survive the unfortunate event; pity suspects it has beaten them.
- \* Let the person know you don't expect a response to your note or letter. After writing thank-you notes for flowers, condolences, memorials, honorary pallbearers, and special assistance, there is often little energy left to acknowledge sympathy letters.
- \* If you're writing to one member of the family, mention the others in your closing.
- \* To ensure that you don't write anything awkward, pitying, or tactless, re-read your letter as though you were the one receiving it.
- \* For additional advice, see Leonard M. Zunin and Hilary Stanton Zunin, *The Art of Condolence: What to Write, What to Say., What to Do at a Time of Loss* (199.1). For more general background reading, see Judith Viorst. *Necessary Losses* (1986).

## Special Situations

- \* Miscarriages and stillbirths are devastating. Sympathize as you would for the death of any child. Avoid such unfortunately common remarks as: "You already have two lovely children— Be grateful for what you have"; "This may have been for the best — there might have been something wrong with the baby, and this was nature's way of taking care of it"; "You're young yet — you can try again." And die worst of all: "Don't feel so bad. After all, it isn't as though you lost a child." The person *has* lost a child.
- \* In the case of a suicide, offer sympathy as you would to any bereaved family. Because many survivors experience feelings of guilt, rejection, confusion, and social stigma, they need to know that you're thinking of them. Although it is generally appropriate to say you were "shocked to hear about" someone's death, avoid the phrase in this case. Don't ask questions, speculate about how the death could have been prevented, or dwell on the fact of the suicide; what matters is that the person is gone and the family is grieving. Instead, talk -about how-the person touched your life, share a happy memory, or express sympathy for the bereaved's pain.

- \* Those who live with AIDS are first of all your friends, neighbors, and relatives, and only second someone with a usually fatal illness. Write as you would to anyone with a serious illness. Don't assume the person's time is short. Some AIDS patients have good years ahead of them in spite of recurrent crises. It's more important to be supportive and to send a card than to say exactly the right thing. Focus on how special the person is to you rather than on their illness, their prognosis, the sadness of it all. Ask if they'd like company; because of the perceived nature of AIDS, some people are unwilling to visit and your friend may appreciate seeing you all the more.
- \* Responding to news of a divorce<sup>1</sup> or separation is difficult, unless you're well acquainted with the person you're addressing. Neither expressions of sympathy nor congratulations are entirely appropriate in most cases. However, whether the person is "better off" or not, such life changes are never without their sad aspects and mourned losses, and a message of sympathy and support is often welcome.
- \* Don't hesitate to write to people experiencing a misfortune considered embarrassing (a family member convicted of a crime, for example); if friends and family are hurting, your warm message of support will be welcome.
- \* When business associates, customers, clients, or employees lose someone close to them, write as you would for friends or relatives, although your note will be shorter and more formal. Avoid personal remarks; it is enough to say you are thinking about them at this time. Extend sympathy on behalf of the company and convey condolences to other members of the person's family. When writing to the family of an employee who has died, you can offer assistance in gathering personal effects, discuss the pension plan, or make a referral to someone in the company who can help with questions.
- \* Those who are grieving the death of a companion animal will appreciate a note of sympathy. This loss can be devastating; whether one can identify with the feelings or not expressing sympathy is a loving, respectful gesture.
- \* When someone has lost a close family member, remember the person with a special note on the anniversary of the person's death and (in the case of a spouse) on the couple's wedding anniversary date. Don't worry about "bringing up sad memories." The person will hardly think of anything else on that day, and will be grateful for the supportive note that says somebody remembers. Those who plan class reunions might send cards or flowers to parents of deceased classmates to assure them that their children are remembered.
- \* A letter to someone terminally or very seriously ill is more of a sympathy letter than a "get well" letter, but be careful not to anticipate someone's

death- Avoid mention of imminent death unless the person .has introduced the subject and shows a desire to talk about it. Instead, say how sorry you are to hear that the person is ill and that you are thinking of them. Instead of a "Get Well" card, choose one of the "Thinking of You" or no-message cards.

\* When sending flowers to a funeral home, address the accompanying small card's envelope to "The family of Emily Webb Gibbs."

Insert a plain white card from the florist or your own visiting or business

card with a  
brief  
message  
("Please  
accept my  
sincerest  
sympathy"  
or "My  
thoughts and  
prayers are  
with you  
and the  
children")-  
If you make  
a donation  
to a charity  
in the  
deceased  
person's  
name, give  
the name and  
address of a  
family  
member as  
well as your  
own. The  
charity will  
send a  
notice of the  
contribution  
to the family  
and  
acknowledg  
e to you that  
the donation  
was  
received.

## Format

\* The  
personal letter of  
sympathy is always  
handwritten, unless a  
disability  
prohibits  
it. Use plain  
personal stationery  
or foldovers (no  
bright colors or

fussy  
design).

\*

Commercial  
greeting  
cards are  
acceptable  
as long as  
you add a  
personal line  
or two (or  
more).

\* Sympathy  
letters can be  
typed when  
writing a  
customer,  
client,  
employee, or  
colleague  
whom you  
don't know  
well but  
with whom  
you have  
business  
dealings.  
Use  
business-  
personal  
rather than  
full-size  
letterhead  
stationery.

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**WORDS**

affection	distressed	mourn	sorry
bereavement	faith	ordeal	suffering
bitter	grief	overcome	sympathy
blow	hardship	regret	touched
comfort	healing	remember	tragic
commiserate	heartache	saddened	trouble
compassion	heartbroken	severe	trying
concerned	heartsick	shaken-	unfortunate
consolation	heavy-hearted	share	unhappy
devastating	hope	shocked	unwelcome
difficult	misfortune	sorrow	upset

PHRASES

although I  
never met  
at a loss for  
words  
beautiful/bl  
essed/cheris  
hed  
    memories deepest  
sympathy deeply  
saddened during this  
difficult time  
extremely/terribly/so  
sorry to hear of  
family sorrow  
feel fortunate to have  
known feel the loss  
of grand person  
greatly saddened<sup>L</sup>  
greatly/sadly/sorely  
missed grieved to  
hear/learn of your  
loss grieve/mourn  
with you heart goes  
out to I remember so  
well  
I was saddened to  
learn/so sorry to  
    hear that  
in your time of great  
sorrow legacy of  
wisdom, humor, and  
love  
    of family  
long be  
remembered for  
made a  
difference in  
many lives many  
friends share  
your grief no  
words, to express  
my great/  
    overwhelming/sinc  
    ere/deep sorrow

offer most  
sincere/heartfelt/deepest

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rich memories

sad change in your

circumstances

sad

event/news/bereave

ment

send my

condolences/our

deepest

sympathy

sharing in your

grief/sorrow during

this difficult time

shocked and

profoundly –grieved

/

saddened

sick at heart

sincere

condolences

sorry to

learn/hear about  
so special to me  
stunned by the  
news  
terrible blow  
touched to the  
quick  
tragic news  
trying time  
upsetting news  
warmest  
sympathy  
wish to extend  
our condolences/  
    sympathy  
with sincere  
    feeling/personal  
    sorrow/ love and  
    sympathy/sorrow  
    and concern

## SENTENCES

All of us are the  
poorer for Patrick's  
death.

Dora was a  
wonderful person,  
talented and  
loving, and I know  
that you and your  
family have  
suffered a great  
loss.

How sad I  
was to hear  
of Hsuang  
Tsang's  
sudden  
death.

I  
am  
dun  
kin  
g of  
you  
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I  
can  
still  
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I hope you  
don't  
mind, but  
Marion  
Halcomb  
e told us  
about  
your  
recent  
bad luck  
and I  
wanted to  
tell you  
how sorry  
we were  
to hear it.

I know  
Phillip  
had many  
admiring  
friends,  
and I am  
proud to  
have  
"been one  
of them.

I  
reme  
mber

the  
way  
your  
moth  
er  
made  
all  
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welco  
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fudge  
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her  
big  
smile  
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It seems  
impossibl  
e to speak  
of any  
consolatio  
n hi the  
face of  
such a  
bitter loss.

It was with  
great  
sadness/s  
ense of  
loss/profo  
und  
sorrow  
that I  
learned of  
Ramona's  
death.

I was so  
sorry to  
hear that  
Mr.  
Golovin's  
long and

courageo  
us battle  
with  
cancer has  
ended.

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Like so  
many  
others  
who were  
drawn to  
Yancy by  
his charm,  
courage,  
and  
warmth, I  
am deeply  
grieved  
and  
bewildere  
d by his

unexpected  
death.

Please  
extend our  
condolences  
to the  
members of  
your family.

Professor  
Bhaer will always  
remain alive in the  
memories of those  
who

loved,  
respected,  
and  
treasured  
him.

The loss of  
your warm  
and  
charming  
home  
saddened us  
all.

The  
mem  
bers  
of the  
Crest  
well  
Wom  
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Club  
send  
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their  
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sympa  
thy.

The world  
has lost  
someone  
very special.

We always  
enjoyed  
Dr.  
Stanton's  
company

and  
respected  
him so  
much as a  
competent  
, caring  
physician  
and  
surgeon.

We were  
grieved to  
hear that  
your baby  
was stillborn.

We  
were  
stunn  
ed to  
hear  
that  
you  
lost  
your  
job,  
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somet  
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mayb  
e even  
better.

We who knew and loved Varena have some idea of how great your loss truly is. You and the family are much in our thoughts these days. Your grief is shared by many.

#### PARAGRAPHS

We felt so bad when we heard about the burglary. Something similar happened to us, and it affected me much more deeply and took longer to get over than I would ever have expected. I hope you are not too undone. May we lend you anything? Help put things back in order? Type up an inventory of what's missing? I'll stop by to see what you need.

This will acknowledge your letter of the 16th. Unfortunately, Mr. Newman is vacationing in a wilderness area this week, but I know he will be most distressed to learn of your brother's death when he returns. Please accept my sympathy on your loss—Mr. de Bellegarde visited here only once, but he left behind the memory of a charming, generous man.

Helen's death is a sad loss for you and for many others at Zizzbaum & Son. We too will sorely miss her both from a personal and from a professional standpoint. As you know, we could not have been more pleased with her work for us over the past five years. She-made many good friends here and we all send you our heartfelt sympathy.

It's been a year today since Hebbie died, and I wanted to tell you that we think of him often and with great affection. You must still miss him very much. I hope you are keeping busy and managing to find small happinesses in everyday things. We will be passing through Cool Clary in March, and hope to see you then.

The staff and student body join me in extending our sympathy to you on the death of your father. I have heard the stories you tell about this delightful and determined man, and I am sure this is a great loss for you. A special donation has been made to the scholarship fund. Next year, one of the scholarships will carry his name.

There is no good time for a tragedy, of course, but I know that you were in the midst of completing plans for the national conference. Would it help if I tied up the loose ends for you? You are so organized I'm sure I'll have no trouble following' your notes. Just say the word if this is something I could do for you. And, again, please accept my most sincere sympathies on your sister's death.

## SAMPLE LETTERS

Dear Mr. Latch,

I was so sorry to hear of Mrs. Latch's death. Although I haven't seen you since I left Barfield, I have often thought with great affection and pleasure of those wonderful days we spent together at the races. Please accept my sympathy on your sad loss.

Yours truly,

Dear Mary and Jessie,

We were all so sorry to hear about your father's death. He was a fine man, and all of Cranford is in mourning for him. I remember seeing him take the two of you for a walk each evening after dinner when you were just little girls. I hope your memories of him will be some comfort to you.

Please accept our sympathy and good wishes.

Sincerely,

Dear Lydia,

I was shocked to hear of Noel's death; you must be devastated. You and Noel were always closer than any married couple I know. I can only hope that your years of happiness and your many good memories will enable you to live with this sad loss.

Affectionately yours,

Dear Dr. and Mrs. Primrose,

Please accept my sympathy on the fire that leveled your home. I understand you and your family are staying temporarily with the Thornhills. As soon as you begin rebuilding, please let me know—I would like to help.

My husband joins me in hoping that you and the children will soon be back in your own home.

With best wishes,

Dear Jody,

We were all sorry to hear the sad news. Hag was much more than a pet, I know, and you must be wondering if you'll ever feel happy again. I'm enclosing a picture that I took of you and Flag about a month ago. I hope it doesn't make you sad, but brings back good memories instead.

Love,

Dear Eden,

Harriet tells me that your divorce from Alayne is now final. Please accept my sympathies for the difficult experience this must have been. I also send my best wishes for a bright and happy future. I'll call you next week to see if you have time to get together.

Your friend,

Dear Ms. Abinger:

""•

I was sorry to hear of the recent flooding you've had at the Corner Stores. It is one of those horror stories that haunt the dreams of self-employed businesspeople everywhere. I wish you all good luck in getting things back to normal as quickly as possible.

I wanted to assure you that although I will temporarily order my supplies elsewhere, I will be bringing my business back to you as soon as you are ready. I appreciate our long association and am looking forward to doing business with you again.

Sincerely,

Dear Leora and Martin,

Please accept our most heartfelt condolences on your miscarriage. I know how much you were both looking forward to welcoming this child into your lives.

Will you let us know the moment you feel up to a quiet visit? We would like to stop by with a couple of our warmest hugs.

With love and sympathy,

Dear Kitty and Chris,

We were stunned to hear the tragic news about Oliver. Everyone who knows you must be appalled and heartbroken at the loss of your bright, charming, lovable son. There are no words to adequately express our sympathy for the devastation and profound loss you must be feeling. Please know we are thinking of you and praying for you ever} <sup>7</sup> minute.

In talking with Chris's mother, we learned that you are without a car because of the accident. We're leaving one of the demo cars for your use as long as you need it. Please let us do this; there is no need to call or to discuss it.

We'll be seeing you in the next couple of days. Until then, we send all our love and deepest sympathy.

Sincerely,

See also: ACKNOWLEDGMENTS, ANNOUNCEMENTS, BELATED, "GET WELL," RESPONSES, THANK YOU