

For Siblings



Training the Dogs

"I know just how you feel; my dog died last month and it's been so hard."

This was actually something said to me at my sister, Emily's funeral. I remember being so stunned by the comment that it actually shook me from my crippling grief for about three seconds as I stood there staring at this crass woman in a bad hat. A voice inside my head screamed, *"She did not just compare my sister to a Dog, did she?!!"* Little did I know it was merely the beginning of the inappropriate suggestions and unsolicited "guidance" my family was destined to receive over the following days, weeks, and months.

Of course, this happens to every bereaved person. Witness a sampling of actual things said to me and others after the death of a loved one:

"Well, at least you can have other children."

"I'm so glad it was her and not you."

"it's time for you to get over this and move on."

"I guess God decided she was done with whatever she needed to do on earth."

"I bet your sister will be reincarnated in your future children."

Now, almost fifteen years (!) and countless hours spent talking to therapists and fellow griever later, I feel pretty confident in assuming that most people say these inappropriate things in an attempt to be helpful. They're just really lousy at it.

Ironically, the woman who made the dog comment may have been on to something. It took me several years to realize that she meant well, and in some ways people are not all that different from dogs. Perhaps people can be taught sensitivity and empathy the same way a dog is trained: with simple, clear commands and lots of positive reinforcement.

So here are some guidelines I've come up with:

DO thank someone when they say or do something nice to you. It's important to "praise the pup," so to speak. Oftentimes we focus on hurtful behavior, forgetting to thank someone for subtle acts of thoughtfulness. After Emily died, I remember a friend who said simply, "I don't know what to say, I just know that I love you." It wasn't something Hallmark wrote, but her honesty touched me deeply. So I thanked her.

DO think of a specific task someone can take care of to help you. Tell a dog, "My feet are cold," and it's impossible for him to help you, but say, "Fetch my slippers," and now he's got a task. And just as a dog wants nothing more than to please his owner, there are friends in your life who really want to help. But you need to tell them what to do. Put aside embarrassment or guilt and simply ask them.

DON'T give your grief a deadline and DO explain this to friends and family. You can't tell a dog to be trained by next Tuesday any more than you can pick a day on the calendar to be done grieving. Others may want you to "get over it" and "get back to normal," but don't let their discomfort dictate what you do, say and feel.

DON'T let someone push you around. When you train a dog it's important to find a voice and/or tone that shows dominance, yet compassion. It's the same with people who push their own opinions about death and grief onto you. Maybe they can't take a hint, and keep insisting you need their advice, religion or psychic friend. "I understand that you want to help me right now and I appreciate that. However, [the hurtful behavior] is not what I need right now. What would help me most would be for you to _____, [filling in the blank as politely as you can]."

So, how did I do taking my own advice – training my own "dog," so to speak? Well, my greatest accomplishment was learning to swallow my pride and ask for help. My friend Maggie is there when I'm feeling low and I need someone to watch my kids for a bit, and my gal Mindy will always listen when I need to vent about my family. I've learned so say, "I need empathy right now and not advice." And I've worked hard to keep the friendships that are important to me. But more important, I've let go of a lot of anger stored up from hurtful things said after Emily died. The truth is, some dogs can't be trained, but rest assured, some can become friends for life.

By Kim Kleyla Hammer, in memory of her sister, Emily.
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Remembrance

In the light of day

I awake with thoughts of you.

In the dark of night

I sleep with thoughts of you.

Is it grief or disbelief?



By Evan Fillmore, Huntington, UT
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