

Why do we say things we shouldn't?

• BATYA L. LUDMAN

How is it that we put our feet in our mouths so effortlessly and then go back and do it again and again?

You wish *besh'a tova* (congrats) to a pregnant woman and discover she has miscarried. You hear that someone has recently had a stillbirth and “reassure” her that she is young and can easily get pregnant again.

You go to shiva in a house of mourning and laugh inappropriately or remind the mourners that the deceased lived a good long life; even though for them, their time with their loved one could never be long enough.

You ask someone about their job, only to discover that they've recently been let go. How about that young woman in her thirties whom you embarrass by asking if she is dating anyone seriously, or the young couple you tease about getting pregnant already, only to hear from someone else that they have been struggling with fertility issues. The list is endless.

At times, people say things without thinking, not realizing that what they believe to be innocuous can be very painful to someone else. While questions may be asked innocently, they may nonetheless cause discomfort or embarrassment, especially if the questioner doesn't clue into the pain they have inadvertently caused and continues.

Even the question I typically ask in a routine intake history, about how many children one has and their ages, can cause a moment or more of hesitation if there has been a loss. Does one answer that they had four, but now there are three?

In my office, that's okay, we can discuss it; but what if you are just making small talk with another mom at the park and that's just too private or painful to disclose?

There are so many difficult questions and at times even more difficult answers. We may think that a simple question deserves a simple answer, but sometimes there are no simple answers.

When even small talk can get you into trouble, aside from talking about the weather, a usually safe topic, how can you best avoid “foot in mouth syndrome”? Here are some suggestions:

- When in doubt, less is more. When you are nervous or when you don't quite know what to say, it is easy to ramble on. Unless you ultimately want to put your foot in your mouth or have the person give a big sigh when you depart, try out a simple “how are you?”

- Listen instead of talking is good advice,

especially in a shiva house where really the best thing you can do is to walk in, sit down, say nothing and wait to be spoken to by the mourner.

- Don't say you know just how someone feels. Trust me: you don't. Each person experiences pain or loss in their own way. How you perceive it may be very different from how they do. You can say, “I can't imagine how you feel,” or “I can only imagine how painful this must be.” You are not walking in their shoes at this moment.

- People often avoid certain topics in order to distract and avert attention, or simply don't bring up something unpleasant, for fear of reminding the person of their loss. In all likelihood they are thinking of their loss 24/7. If the environment is supportive and nonjudgmental, people often want to talk (to whoever they consider the right person), share the burden of their loss, and lessen their pain. While this can be therapeutic, it is important to let that other person direct the conversation.

- Talking about your personal story does not make someone else feel better and, unless you are being asked for advice, it is best not to give it. We are given two ears but only one mouth for a reason.

- Sometimes people want to talk and sometimes they choose to be silent. Sometimes people laugh and at other times they may feel like crying.

- Tears are okay, not to be feared and can be cathartic. Each of us copes with loss in our own way, responding differently at different times, with different people. There is no one correct way, and no one correct timeline.

- We each take the meaning of our loss differently and while someone may not have the words to express their pain, your words may or may not work for them. Everyone has to find their own source of comfort in a difficult situation. Your goal is to provide a comfortable and safe environment for them.

- Notice the body language of others. People who are uncomfortable often don't make eye contact. They may move a lot in their seat, hold their arms uncomfortably, fidget, giggle nervously, talk quickly or not at all, or may ramble on. You can reassure others through your gentle and caring eye contact, leaning into a conversation, not interrupting, responding with a nod and assurance that you are both listening and care about what they have to say, and by asking questions when it is appropriate to do so.

- Treat people normally. People who have had a loss are very sensitive to the nuances of others. A woman who has lost



(Mark Hoffer/MCT)

a child may “see” children wherever she goes. A single person wanting to be married may “see” the world as almost entirely paired up.

- It is very important to be respectful; not to whisper, point, or talk inappropriately. You can always say that you are sorry, and that you are at a loss for words and don't know what to say. If you are aware of a loss, as uncomfortable as it may be, it's usually best to acknowledge it in some way.

While you may inadvertently put your foot in your mouth, if you genuinely respect and care about the well-being of others, your caring and love will come through and will be appreciated and valued. ■

The writer is a clinical psychologist in private practice in Ra'anana and the author of Life's Journey: Exploring Relationships – Resolving Conflicts. ludman@netvision.net.il; www.drbatyaludman.com