When a youth in foster care is grieving

What to say instead...

get grief-informed
A CALL FROM YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE

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LISTENING & LED BY YOUTH IN FOSTER CARE
GRIEF, HOPE, & TRANSITIONS

No matter how familiar you are with grief, it can still be hard to know what to say when a loss occurs. It's human nature to fall back on the clichés and platitudes we've grown up hearing. If you've ever found yourself relying on automatic responses, you're not alone. Most of the time these sentiments come from good intentions and a desire to comfort. That said, here are some common ones that often miss the mark with youth in foster care who are grieving, along with suggestions for what to say instead.

This list is a start. Since grief is different for everyone, a good motto to fall back on is this: Ask, don't assume. Aim to create space for someone to talk about their experience rather than trying to fix, change, or take away their pain.

COMMON STATEMENTS	GRIEF-INFORMED RATIONALE	WHAT TO SAY INSTEAD
"You must be..."	Assuming how someone is feeling can be affirming (if you presume correctly), but more often it sets an expectation for their reactions that may or may not be true. If someone doesn't feel the way you think they do, they might experience guilt or shame for not grieving the "right" way.	• How are you feeling today? • How have things been going for you lately?
"At least..."	Adults and caregivers often try to find the silver lining in a youth's experiences of loss and grief, but it's important to note that statements that begin with "at least" can invalidate their true feelings. Examples include: "At least you have a roof over your head." "At least you have us — we're your family now." "At least you still get to see your brother at your monthly visits." These statements minimize the youth's experience and push them to focus on the positive.	• I appreciate all that you share with me. What has this been like for you? • What have you noticed about yourself since entering foster care?
"It's all part of a bigger plan."	Any attempt to put meaning into someone else's experience assumes everyone shares the same worldview. Instead, invite those who are grieving to talk about what they think and feel.	• I'm here to listen. • What's your sense about what happened?

COMMON STATEMENTS	GRIEF-INFORMED RATIONALE	WHAT TO SAY INSTEAD
"I know how you feel."	Grief for youth in foster care is extremely individual. Even siblings may think and feel differently about being in foster care. While you might want to let them know you "get it", your experience is different from theirs, and you really can't know exactly how they feel.	• What has it been like for you? • I've moved away from my brother before, but I know grief is so different for everyone. How was your last visit with him?
"You're so strong."	This assumes you know how the person is doing, without knowing what's happening beneath the surface. It also may put pressure on the person to continue to appear "strong," regardless of how they feel.	• I appreciated you talking with me about what you've been through. It was so helpful to learn more about your experience. How was it for you to share that with me? • You said you started going to a new school, how's that been? • It seems like a lot of people in your life turn to you for help. Who do you go to when you need support?
"Don't feel that way."	If a youth is talking about an emotion that is particularly painful to hear, the instinct can be to try to change their feelings and to try to make them feel better. Resist the urge! When you tell someone not to feel what they're feeling, whether it's guilt, anger, regret, or any other emotion, you're closing off communication.	• You believe that you are in foster care because of something you did. Would you like to talk more about that? • You're really struggling with not being able to return home. What or who are you missing the most right now? • It seems like you have a lot of feelings about why you entered foster care. I'm here if you want to share more.
"Let me know if there's anything I can do."	Offering to help in this way puts the responsibility on the youth to identify what they need and reach out to ask. Instead, make specific, tangible offers of support. It can be hard to accept help, so reassure them it's okay to turn down your offer. Keep checking in as support tends to disappear the longer the youth is in foster care.	• I'm on my way to the store; can I pick something up for you? You said you liked chips and dip, right? I can drop it off to you later this week. • You mentioned music helps you feel better. Can I send you some new songs to add to your playlist?