

Lesson 28 - Expressing Concern, Sympathy, and Condolences

One of the most difficult social situations – for both native and non-native English speakers – is knowing what to say when someone tells you a piece of bad news. In today's lesson, you'll learn phrases for handling these conversations with sensitivity.

Conversation #1 – Bad News

Gina: Hey Peter. What's the matter? You look kind of upset.

Peter: Eh, I've just been having a rough time lately.

Gina: Oh, I'm sorry to hear that. What's going on?

Peter: Well, I've had to work overtime every day for the past two weeks. I don't leave the office until 10 PM.

Gina: Aw, you must be exhausted.

Peter: Yeah, and my car broke down on Tuesday, so I have to take the bus – meaning I don't get home until midnight.

Gina: That's awful! When will your car be fixed?

Peter: The problem is I don't have the money to repair it. I'm barely able to pay my rent as it is, so I have no cash for extra expenses.

Gina: Oh no... that must be stressful.

Peter: And to top it off, my girlfriend and I had a big fight last night... I'm not sure if we're going to stay together.

Gina: Wow. I really hope things get better soon. Is there anything I can do to help?

Peter: Not really... but thanks for asking.

Gina: OK. I'm here for you if you need anything.

Conversation Vocabulary & Phrases

If you can see that somebody is sad or upset, you can use one of these phrases to express your concern and ask for more information:

- **“What’s the matter?”**
- **“Are you all right?”**
- **“Is everything OK?”**
- **“You look a bit down” / “You look kind of upset.”**

If the other person gives one of these responses:

- **“I’m all right.”**
- **“Don’t ask.”**
- **“I don’t really want to talk about it.”**

...this means you shouldn’t ask any more questions! However, in the conversation above, Peter does talk about various problems – too much work, too little money, a broken-down car, and a fight with his girlfriend. Here are some phrases to use for responding to these types of bad news:

- **“I’m sorry to hear that.”**
- **“That must be... exhausting / stressful / difficult.”**
- **“That’s awful! / terrible!”**
Use “that’s...” or “that must be...” for current situations, and “that must have been...” for situations or events in the past.
- **“Oh no...”**
- **“Wow...”**
- **“I hope things get better soon.”**

You can also offer your help and/or emotional support:

- **“Is there anything I can do to help?”**
- **“If you need anything, I’m here for you.”**
- **“Anytime you need to talk, just give me a call.”**
This expression is usually used when someone is going through a more serious difficult period in life, or a difficult situation that is ongoing.

If you're the one who is sad, you can use these phrases to thank the other person for their concern:

- **"Thanks for listening / asking."**
- **"Thanks for your support."**
- **"I appreciate your friendship."**

Conversation #2 – Serious Bad News

In English, we have specific phrases for reacting to bad news that is more serious – for example, when someone is diagnosed with a disease, or when someone has passed away (that's an indirect way to say "died"). Listen to this conversation to learn what to say:

John: Becky... are you all right?

Becky: Not really, no... I just found out that my grandfather passed away.

John: Oh... I'm so sorry for your loss.

Becky: Thanks... I'm flying to Miami for the funeral tomorrow.

John: It must be a really hard time for you and your family.

Becky: Nobody expected it – he wasn't even sick, he just had a sudden heart attack - so it was really a shock.

John: I can imagine... I'm sure he will be greatly missed.

Becky: Holidays just won't be the same without him, you know?

John: Yeah, it's not easy to lose someone you love. Your family will be in my thoughts.

Becky: Thanks, John.

Conversation Vocabulary & Phrases

John says several things which are typically used in reacting to news of a death:

- **"I'm so sorry for your loss."**

- **"I'm sure he will be greatly missed."**
- **"It's not easy to lose someone you love."**
- **"It must be a really hard time for you (and your family)."**
- **"You / Your family will be in my thoughts."**

If you are religious, you can say "in my prayers."

There are a few things NOT to say, because they are considered rude or insensitive in English:

- **~~"How did he die?"~~**
The person might share this detail if they want to – but don't ask about it specifically.
- **~~"I know how you feel. My grandmother died last year."~~**
Although you might be able to understand their feelings, it's considered insensitive to change the focus of the conversation to YOUR experience.
- **~~"He's in a better place."~~**
Not everybody shares the same religious beliefs, so it's best not to comment on what happens after a person dies.

If you knew the person who died, it's nice to share one of your good memories about that person:

- **"I'll never forget when he/she..."**
- **"One of my fondest memories of him/her is when..."**
- **"I remember him/her as... (a very generous/loving/etc. person)"**

Sometimes you might not have a conversation with a person who has had a death in the family, but you can write them a letter, card, or e-mail expressing your condolences. Here are some additional phrases to use in writing:

- **Please accept my deepest condolences.**
- **I was deeply saddened to hear of your loss.**
- **Someone so special will never be forgotten.**
- **My thoughts are with you (and your family) in this time of sorrow.**
- **I wish you peace and courage in this difficult time.**

I hope this lesson has helped you become more confident in your ability to say the

right thing when responding to bad news! Now take the quiz to practice the phrases you learned today.

Quiz – Lesson 28

1) What's the _____?

- A. issue
- B. matter
- C. problem

2) Are you _____?

- A. all right
- B. fine
- C. well

3) I'm so sorry to _____ that

- A. hear
- B. know
- C. listen

4) That _____ be difficult.

- A. can
- B. must
- C. should

5) That's _____!

- A. awesome
- B. awful
- C. awkward

6) Thanks for your _____.

- A. care
- B. honesty
- C. support

7) I'm so sorry for your _____.

- A. death
- B. grief
- C. loss

8) I'm sure he will be greatly _____.

- A. lost
- B. missed
- C. remembered

9) It must be a really _____ for you.

- A. bad luck
- B. hard time
- C. sad period

10) One of my fondest _____ of him is when he took me to a baseball game.

- A. emotions
- B. memories
- C. reminders

11) I was _____ saddened to hear about your mother's passing.

- A. deeply
- B. hardly
- C. mostly

12) My _____ are with you in this time of sorrow.

- A. ideas
- B. memories
- C. thoughts

Lesson 28 Quiz – Answers

1.B 2.A 3.A 4.B 5.B 6.C 7.C 8.B 9.B 10.B 11.A 12.C