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What to Say to Someone Who Is Going Through a Hard Time

Amy Morin:
Welcome to The Verywell Mind Podcast! I'm Amy Morin, the editor-in-chief of Verywell Mind. I'm also a psychotherapist and a best-selling author of four books on mental strength. Every Monday I introduce you to a mentally strong person whose story and mental strength tips can inspire you to think, feel, and do your best in life. And the fun part is we record the show from a sailboat in the Florida Keys. Don't forget to subscribe to the show on your favorite platform so you can get mental strength tips delivered to you every single week.

Now let's dive into today's episode!

Do you struggle to know what to say to someone when they've lost a loved one? Do you avoid saying anything to someone if they're going through a hard time because you're afraid that you're going to say the wrong thing? Do you struggle to know what to do to help someone when they're going through a tough time? If you answered yes to any of those questions, today's episode is for you.

It's really hard to know what to say to someone who's going through a tough time, and there are plenty of situations where it gets pretty complicated and it feels awkward. Like, should you acknowledge a coworker who's going through a divorce? Should you say anything if you learned a friend had a miscarriage, even though they never announced their pregnancy? If you've avoided someone for a while because you weren't sure what to say to them, is it okay to reach out later? The way we respond to other people's pain affects our relationships. It also affects how we view ourselves. You might be really hard on yourself because you didn't show enough kindness, or you might get down on yourself for not checking in with someone often enough. But it's tough to know what to do, how to act, and what to say to someone.

Even though I'm a therapist and an author, I still find it tough to find helpful words for someone who's going through a tough time. Here's an example. I live in South Florida
where some people were just hit hard by a hurricane. If someone’s home was flooded, am I better off saying, "I'm sorry that that happened to you"? Or should I say, "Wow, I'm thankful that you're all okay?" Well, there isn't a one size fits all answer to every situation. But knowing how to respond to someone else's pain is a skill that we can all learn.

Here to help us figure out what to say to someone who's going through a hard time and what not to say is empathy expert Dr. Kelsey Crowe. She heads Empathy Bootcamp, a company that trains people on how to be empathetic. She's also a psychotherapist and the author of an amazing book called *There is No Good Card for This.*

In it, she explains how we can respond to other people with kindness and empathy when they've lost a loved one, when they're going through a divorce, or they've encountered any kind of hardship. Some of the things she talks about today are how to decide when to say something and when not to, the go-to phrase you can use in almost any situation, and the things you can do for someone when there just aren't any words that seem to fit. Make sure to stick around for The Therapist's Take. It's the part of the episode where I'll give you my take on Kelsey's mental strength-building strategies, and I'll share how you can apply them to your own life. So here’s Dr. Kelsey Crowe on what to say to someone who’s going through a hard time.

Amy Morin:
Kelsey Crowe, welcome to *The Verywell Mind Podcast!*

Kelsey Crowe:
Oh, thank you. I'm so glad to be here, Amy.

Amy Morin:
Well, I am excited to talk to you because I reference your book often, and even though I'm a therapist and I'm an author, you'd think I'd be good with words or I'd know what to say to somebody. But that's often what I say to somebody is like, "Hey, you'd think I'd know what to say right now, but sometimes there are no words." And so that's why I appreciate your book. You wrote this book called *There is No Good Card for This, What to Say and Do When Life is Scary, Awful, and Unfair to People You Love.* And then ironically, your co-author, Emily McDowell, is actually a greeting card writer, right?

Kelsey Crowe:
Yes. Yeah, yeah. So she's amazing.

Amy Morin:
But you're right. There are so many times in life when a card that says, "Gee, I'm thinking of you," just doesn't feel enough. And we often don't know what to say to people when they're going through tough times. So I'm glad that you wrote a book to give us a guide. What do you find are some of the biggest struggles we have when it comes to knowing what do you say to somebody who's lost a loved one? What do you say to somebody when they're going through a tough time without sounding condescending or uncaring?

Kelsey Crowe:
Yeah, I think one of the hardest parts about giving condolences is thinking there's some perfect thing to say, and that we just need to find it and we can't find it so maybe we shouldn't try. Or just leave it to Hallmark, because what could I say? So I think just believing that somebody's expecting these perfect words from us is the hardest, biggest hurdle. And also some people really are not good card writers, so there may be, as I point out in my book, other things that they can do to show that they care and they notice what's going on. But I do think believing that there's some perfect gesture or some perfect phrase out there is the big obstacle.

Amy Morin:
Right. And it always feels different depending on your relationship with the person.

Kelsey Crowe:
Absolutely.

Amy Morin:
If I'm writing a card to my best friend, I don't want to just say, "Thoughts are with you," or, "Sorry."

Kelsey Crowe:
Right, yeah.

Amy Morin:
That doesn't feel right. But again, if it's somebody, an acquaintance, I'm not going to write this really heartfelt handwritten letter either. So in figuring out what's your relationship with the person, should we factor that in?

Kelsey Crowe:
Absolutely. And I think that, well it's funny because when I first conceived of the book, I did so because I had a hard time knowing what to say to people. And I thought, surely other people have this problem. So I did a lot of interview research and open ended
survey research and I thought I could come up with some kind of perfect algorithm for this is what you say to this type of person, just plug and play. Straight colleague this, neighbor this, somebody you've known for 10 years, this. Somebody you've just met a month ago, this. And there's actually no precise formula.

However, I think what can really help you when thinking about what to say to somebody in a card, say it's somebody who you just met and you had lunch with them for the first time, a colleague, this is where it's often very tricky, and then something tragic happens to them and you don't actually have a lot of data or a lot of relationship to tap into. If you know that person had said something about this person, say it was a loss of a husband or loss of a child or of a parent, just saying, "I heard you speak about him and I could tell that you had a very special relationship." Or, "I don't know about the relationship you have, but loss is so hard and I'm so very sorry."

Being as upfront as you can be about what you do know and don't know, but if there is something that you know, even if you don't know the person that well, but there's something you know about the person who died, or the disease that killed them, if it's a disease, whether it's suicide or cancer or whatever, that that's an awful, awful disease, phenomenon, and I'm so sorry for the struggle you had. And that actually can go to anybody, somebody you just met, to somebody who you've known for a really long time. And obviously if it's a good friend, you're going to be doing a lot more than writing a card anyway. You may not even ever get around to writing the card.

Amy Morin:
Right. If you show up in person and you're doing things.

Kelsey Crowe:
Yeah, you're texting on the phone all the time and you're, yeah.

Amy Morin:
I had my own experience, and being on the receiving end of a lot of this, as I know you did, you had cancer. And I'm sure people, that's another one of those times, it's not always just the loss of a loved one, but sometimes when somebody has an illness, do you say anything?

Kelsey Crowe:
Yeah, totally.

Amy Morin:
[inaudible 00:08:17] this is awful. I'm so sorry, but you also don't-
Kelsey Crowe:
When you're bald and it's like, do I pretend I don't notice what's going on here? Bald from chemo, yeah.

Amy Morin:
What do you do? If somebody's never mentioned something to you but it's obvious, should you bring it up or should you not?

Kelsey Crowe:
I think it just depends on the relationship and your comfort level with it. Definitely with something very obvious. If you've had a physical accident or you are going through chemo, there's just physical signs and somebody sees you and they weren't told, but it's obvious, they can say, "Oh, well you're obviously going through something really hard right now. How is it going for you now?" Because I might be a stage in my treatment where actually I'm feeling really hopeful about it and I feel so grateful that I have it. Somebody else might feel about their treatment now that it sucks and it's so much worse than they ever thought it would be.

So asking, instead of just saying, "I'm so sorry," you could say, "How's it going for you now?" And that emphasis on now for somebody you haven't seen in a long time or somebody whose situation you didn't know about, I mean you're just encountering it spontaneously, "How are you doing with it now," is a way of keeping the conversation super contained and they can give you a pretty short answer or they can elaborate.

Amy Morin:
I like that. And just that extra word now. Because when you say, "Hey, how have you been?" Well-

Kelsey Crowe:
Well, you know? And also you can feel like, yeah, so especially say you've lost somebody. At some points you actually feel better than you did before. And when someone asks you, "How are you doing?" You don't want to say, "I feel good," but you actually feel glad to be feeling good today. So, "How are you doing with it now," gives you a chance to say, "Now I'm doing okay, it was hard at first and I'm doing okay now." Or, "I didn't know that it would hit me so hard and it's actually worse now than it was two months ago." Doesn't mean someone has to give an authentic response but it will more likely bring one out.

Amy Morin:
And what about how careful should we be about where we are? You run into somebody in the grocery store, is it okay to bring that up?

Kelsey Crowe:
Totally. Yeah. That was one of my biggest fears when approaching this book is, well, when's the right time? You're seeing somebody at pick up with their kid, you're in the grocery store. Do you chase them down? You're in a meeting and then the meeting leaves, everyone leaves and you don't know whether to go grab the person or not. Anywhere. It's fine. In some 10, 15% of cases, let's say, just spitball estimate, people are being asked too much in the grocery store or at work. But in the majority of cases, from my research and from what I've read, people have not been asked enough. And better to have the problem of too much care than too little.

But the big thing is when you ask in those situations, you're not doing it to check it off a list. I know I should ask, because then it's not an authentic encounter and then that puts the other person on the spot. But if you genuinely want to know, and you can genuinely want to know and expect just a two sentence exchange about it.

Amy Morin:
And there's a fear sometimes of saying the wrong thing, so then we don't say anything at all. Right?

Kelsey Crowe:
I think you're totally right about that. Absolutely. And we have a great, I say we, we have a training team that works with me, these Empathy Bootcamp workshops, and we have an online piece and we have this audio of an interview I did, she's a social work professor talking about a colleague whose wife died of cancer and she's standing in the line of the coffee vending machine, not knowing whether to say anything. And she's like, "And I didn't know if I would bring it up, if it would make him feel worse. Maybe he wasn't thinking about it." All the things that come up. And so she didn't say anything. And then she wrote him an email later and she said, "I just want to say I'm sorry." And he wrote back and he said, "Thank you so much."

And she was so surprised by his appreciation. And she herself had gone through cancer. Again, a social work professor, like all of us, whether we've been through hard times or not, or that particular hard time, whether we have professional training or feel like we should have professional training, we actually all feel, to your point, very awkward in these situations. So the less stress we put on ourselves, like I've said, to say or do the right thing or to have the perfect moment, right? Oh, I'm sure at some point she and I are going to wind up over dinner with candlelight with an opportunity for me to ask how she really feels. It's not going to happen.
Amy Morin:
I was 23, I was working as a therapist when my mom passed away, and I took a week off from work. And I remember when I went back to the office, some people said something, some people didn't, some people had given me a card. And two days after I had gotten back to work, I got a phone call from my sister that my dad's house was on fire. So I left work early that day to go see what was going on and it didn't burn flat, but a lot of stuff was destroyed. But I went back to work the next day and I ran into one of my coworkers in the photocopy room and he said, "I just don't know what to say to you." And that was the nicest thing I think anybody could have said was to just acknowledge it and then say, "And I don't know what to say." That's okay. I don't know what to say either.

Kelsey Crowe:
Yeah. Isn't it so much better than something that suggests I can fix it for you, or you'll be over this soon, or hard times come in threes, or whatever kind of awful platitude, just the humility that it's so overwhelming, that you're in an overwhelming situation and I am overwhelmed with you. So that is an incredible thing to have happened to you.

Amy Morin:
Yeah. Well then when I was 26, my husband died of a heart attack. And that's what I got from a lot of people was those sorts of comments like, "You're young, you'll get remarried." That was not what I wanted to hear, although they were trying to be hopeful and trying to say positive things, or everything happens for a reason. We say those things, right, because it makes us feel a little bit better or we want to be hopeful to somebody else. But those things often fall short, right?

Kelsey Crowe:
Yeah. I call them non listening styles. So the eternal optimist is the person who says there are other fish in the sea, you're going to be fine. The sage is the one who is so wise with everything happens for a reason. They offer these platitudes. And if you don't know what to say, very likely your best bet is to say very little and ask, "How are you doing with it today?" Or, "I don't know what to say. I wish I did."

Amy Morin:
When I say appropriate to be hopeful, so when somebody says, Jay, "I just got turned down for this job interview and I'm in a tough place," you want to say to him, "Oh, you'll get a job eventually or the next one will work out." But when does that cross that line into this sort of toxic positivity that backfires?

Kelsey Crowe:
Totally. And actually, there's a lot in the grief field among philosophers that kind of talk about the role of hope in getting through difficult times. And of course in the more general conversation about toxic positivity. I'm a New Yorker and a Sagittarius, so I've always leaned towards being a pessimist. So when someone would be positive with me, I'd just want to strangle them and be like... So what is that fine line? If someone loses their job and you say you're going to find another job, no problem. It's a little like, well how do you know that? How do you frigging know? If however you say, "You've done some of the best work I've ever seen in this area, you will be found for that." That is speaking to somebody's strengths and why they will be hired again.

But also, for example, if you really care, just offer them a LinkedIn connection, offer to introduce them to a couple of people. Do something that makes somebody feel worthwhile, because losing your job is such an identity crisis and it can make you feel very ashamed. So people who want to associate with you when you are feeling like a failure, and people who want to lift you up through action, like introductions, like LinkedIn posts, if you find jobs, job leads, what you can say instead of, "I thought you might want to apply for this," is maybe you know somebody who would be interested.

Amy Morin:
Oh.

Kelsey Crowe:
Nice light touch. And otherwise, speaking to someone’s strengths. So if somebody even says, "I don't think I can go through with this anymore." When I was in chemo, I was not running marathons on chemo. And I really didn't know if I could go through with it. And I had one person, this was my husband, and he said, "I know this is so hard." So it's not pretending that it's not hard. "I know this is so hard, I see how you're suffering, and I know that you gave birth to Georgia, our daughter, and I know that you can do this." Basing it on that person's reality, not just some platitude.

Amy Morin:
I like that, because sometimes we want to give people hope by telling them a story of somebody else. So we'll say, and you mentioned that's the reference you give in your book, if I say, "Oh, you're going through chemo, I know somebody that ran a marathon on chemo, it's not that bad." Or people that were able to continue working and never got sick once. What does that do to you when you're struggling?

Kelsey Crowe:
Yeah, it's so funny, because again, it's the pessimist. So I was always the one for the non listening style that was the doomsayer. And I would just say like, "Oh no, I know somebody who died of cancer." I was that person and I thought I was commiserating
with them on how bad it is. But actually people don't want to hear worst case scenarios, which I just had to let the research speak, the data speak. Right? So what do people want to hear? They do want to hear hope, but it has to be founded in something real, not like a TV show. But if you know somebody who has gone through something, so I tend to couch things like this, "This is really sucky. I obviously don't know a lot about it. I feel terrible that this has happened for you," or, "I'm so sorry this has happened to you. If it's helpful, I do know somebody who's 20 years with lung cancer and lives down my block, if you ever want to connect." You know?

IVF treatment, you keep trying and trying and you can feel like a dodo bird for continuing to try and put all that money into it. Am I just pissing it all away? And hearing stories of hope, "I know it's really hard to make these decisions. I could understand going either way. I do know somebody who made it on their fourth try and that is my hope for you." Not you will be able to do it because I know someone who did it, but I have hope for you because I know somebody for whom this worked. But no guarantees that it will work. Nothing to dismiss the anxiety and the fear that that person has. Because it really may not work out.

Amy Morin:
That's true. And when we just act like we know it, like oh, it's definitely all going to work out.

Kelsey Crowe:
Yeah, it's like, are you God? No.

Amy Morin:
Right. And then when should we share if we have a similar experience versus not? So somebody's grandfather died, should you say, "Hey, I lost my grandfather too." Or do you keep that to yourself? I remember when I lost my husband, I was 26, but sometimes somebody who was 75 would be like, "I know what you're going through. I lost my spouse last year." I remember raising an eyebrow like, well, it's not exactly the same. And I also got a card from somebody with this really long letter about grief and loss and how they could totally relate. They had lost a puppy. And I thought, yeah, no, actually I don't think we are on the same page. And so sometimes hearing those stories wasn't helpful. But then when I would meet somebody that I really thought was going through something similar or could relate to my experience, then it did feel okay.

Kelsey Crowe:
Yeah. There's two kind of reasons to share. One is to help someone not feel ashamed. So this happened to me too. And especially with things like failure, that you feel like failure, and miscarriage is an interesting one because people do feel a sense of failure
when they've miscarried even. And then the other reason to share, well, and so with that shame, if somebody's been grieving for a long time and they feel like they should be over it already, it shouldn't be bothering me so much. I shouldn't be thinking about this. I should be moving on already. So to help somebody not feel shame, and so, "I've been there, I know you're not going to be moving on right now. You don't have to be moving on for me. I've had a miscarriage, I know how hard it can be."

But sometimes people share because they think they're doing that and then they wind up, wow, this feels so good to talk about it. And they monopolize the conversation and they wind up actually comparing their situation to yours. And then it really doesn't work. Whether because their situation was worse or because it feels very trivial in comparison to yours. So I think oftentimes if you don't sense a thing of shame around it and somebody's just going through it, someone can sense that you feel, really, you feel for them. When they hear you say, "I'm so sorry."

When you ask certain questions that show you've been there, "How are you managing the paperwork? What was the funeral like for you?" That shows that you get it. And also you actually don't get many people asking you those kind of questions. So even if somebody doesn't know you very well, but they like you, you can ask that because because you're like, "Wow, thanks. Yeah, the funeral, it amazed me," or, "It kind of disappointed me," whatever.

So I think that being able to suggest that you've been in a similar experience with somebody else without necessarily sharing what your experience was can be the safe way to go, unless a person seems to feel some shame. And then I think you can share, "I went through that too." And then here's the trick, "I went through that too. How are you doing with it?" Boom. Just be mindful, just in your mind, flip it. Because they're going to be like, "Oh you did? What happened?" And then you'll wind up talking, talking, talking. So just say, "I'll share with you another time. I'm just letting you know, but how are you doing with it? I want to know from you."

Amy Morin:
I like that. That's a good one. Because you're right, otherwise it can often just become more about the other person sharing their story.

Kelsey Crowe:
It totally happens. And then you, you know, yeah.

Amy Morin:
Something else you talk a lot about in your book is small gestures. And we often say things like, "Well, let me know if you need anything." And then the person doesn't get back to us, and so then we think, well, I guess they didn't need anything. Or we don't
know what they need. Or we send a card and then we don't do anything else. But you talk a lot about how sometimes just really small gestures can make a big difference.

Kelsey Crowe:
You've really read my book.

Amy Morin:
Yes. As I told you for my own purposes.

Kelsey Crowe:
Yeah. That one really blew me away when I was doing the research. Because again, I guess I was looking for these perfect gestures, these grand gestures that I just was not seeing. And when I asked people in an open ended survey format, what did somebody do that made a difference? So often they would write things like they texted me, called me on the anniversary date, sent me flowers. And then if it was somebody who you hadn't heard from in a long time, and I'm sure you experienced this or I hope you did, but maybe you didn't because you were so young when your husband died. Somebody who knew you from a long time ago reaching out and saying, "I heard this happened and I'm just so sorry." Through an email, doesn't even have to be a card.

And in my workshops, in these Empathy Bootcamps that we do, we have something called a gesture wall, where one of the exercises, say 30 people are in a room that people do, is they write down on a card in response to questions, what's something a neighbor did? What's something a colleague did? What's something a stranger did? What's something that an old friend did for you in your difficult time? And people can answer all of them or one or two of them. And then you put them up on a wall and you have this huge wall of gestures. And I feel like honestly that gesture wall we call it does all the work for me. Because you scan all these gestures and you're like, holy cow, I have almost all of these tools in my toolbox and I never even knew it. I didn't even know they were tools.

You've put those gestures up, so you believe it, you know? You get it. You're like, "Yeah, actually that is all it took." And here's something that I don't have in the book. And if it's too long-winded, you can edit this. I know you can. But also a lot of times it's the timing, and you can't account for that. So I think a lot of gestures came my way in my various hard times that I didn't fully notice. But then other gestures, like somebody in my hiking group who I'd just met left me food on my doorstep. I really remember that. Someone brought over a coconut, which felt really novel and different when I was in my home for eight months, and brought a machete and did this. That was the first time I'd seen him in two years. He was my husband's friend. And yet so many other gestures I think came my way and subliminally helped me feel supported. But certain ones just stand out and we can't control for that.
So a really important thing when we do these small gestures is to not expect a thank you note. Because they really likely appreciate it, but they can't always thank you. Actually most of the time they can't thank you, and you just have to trust that it will land and that to try is better than to not try. And what else can you do? And you can't control for the timing.

Amy Morin:
I think that's all absolutely true. I remember after my loss of my husband, my brother-in-law was like, "I'm going to clean your house." And he scrubbed every inch and quarter of my entire house. And I think part of it was because he really just wasn't comfortable sitting around and crying.

Kelsey Crowe:
Talking about it, right.

Amy Morin:
"I'm going to get up and go do something for you." I didn't send him a thank you note. I've probably still never really said thank you to him to this day. But that was a huge help for me in that moment. I was not going to clean my house for probably a really long time. Or I had people that brought food, people that thought of me weeks later after all of the other people go away. When somebody calls you when it's been three weeks and they still say, "I'm thinking of you," that can make a huge difference.

Kelsey Crowe:
To all the procrastinators that are listening to this bright podcast, or to those who've been fretting and not reaching out because they didn't know what to do or say, in this case you could reach out... Don't worry, don't worry if you're reaching out months later, a year later, and just say, "I know you lost your husband last year. How are you doing with it now?" If this is somebody who for some reason actually cares, don't ask if you don't care. Because there's so many people in our lives that we come across that have problems. So just be there for them. But if you don't care, leave it alone. Because then it just seems like curiosity and not concern.

Amy Morin:
And what about those cases where maybe we didn't know what to say so we said nothing, and then some time goes by and you feel guilty because you didn't do anything or say anything, and then you're like, ugh, and now you feel even more awkward? What should you do in those situations? Maybe you did care but you just didn't take action in the moment.
Kelsey Crowe:
Yeah, don't elaborate on it. Just say, "I wish I had reached out sooner. It's on my mind all the time. I've been thinking about you." No excuses, no, oh my god, how often did I hear this? "I'm so sorry, bridge traffic, I'm sorry I couldn't visit you during chemo." You hear these excuses, other than, "I was afraid or I didn't know what to say," because that's really what it is. And just say that.

And that humility of, "Yeah, I don't know what I'm doing either. Thank you for that. Thank you for not phoning it in with some bullshit excuse." And then keeping it brief. Sometimes we may elaborate, "I thought I would do this but I didn't. Then I thought I would do that." Just keep it brief and then put it back onto the other person. But, "You've been on my mind. I've wondered how it's been for you to be back at work, or if you've even talked with his parents, or I remember something about John that has always stayed with me and it was this." So then just keep it focused on the other person.

Amy Morin:
I like that. When something’s awkward, just acknowledge it. And I think when we acknowledge something beforehand too, potentially awkward, so I'll tell you something that my boss did. She called me before my husband's funeral and said, "Some of us would like to attend, but we don't know if that would be weird for you, for a bunch of your coworkers to show up. Would you like us there or not?" And I so appreciated it, which I said, "Yeah, absolutely. It's going to be strange that my dad is now going to meet my boss and vice versa, but this is a strange time in my life." And at that moment I said, "Yeah, please do come." And they did. But I appreciated that she called me first and asked me that question.

Kelsey Crowe:
Yeah, that is a great idea. I love that. And then if you can't ask, always go to the funeral. But if you can, that's a great idea. And you could preface that with, "You may have a lot going on right now, so no need to respond and we'll figure it out."

Amy Morin:
I like that idea too because sometimes people will say, "Well I called you three times and you didn't get back."

Kelsey Crowe:
Oh, it's the worst, I know. But of course these times feel so high stakes. And so that's why people want to know, "Did you get my message? Do you know that I care? Do you know I'm here for you?" We feel anxious for the other person and are afraid too that we're messing it up. But doesn't mean we have to listen to that anxiety. So we may feel
that anxiousness that they haven't written back. We may feel worried that we didn't get a thank you note, but don't. Reach out and give absolutely all permission to not write back, not respond back, and say, "And I'll check in on you in another week or two."

Amy Morin:
And what if you have put your foot in your mouth? What if a week later you realize, oh geez, that thing I said to that person, or I didn't know the whole story, or I said something that maybe came across wrong. Should you go back and apologize? Do you just let it go? Do you bring it up or not?

Kelsey Crowe:
I would say if you can. Yeah. Yeah. And that actually in a very different context, but I was teaching a class, a social work class, and my class was pretty frustrated with one area of content that I was teaching, and I was just getting it in little comments and I kind of wanted to pretend that that frustration wasn't happening or that this awkwardness wasn't happening. And I said instead, "I'm sorry, I think I failed you. I didn't think of this." And that built so much trust with the class, it just built so much trust.

So I know that when someone doesn't hold themselves accountable, it can be hard to trust them. So by holding yourself accountable and saying, "I suck, I'm sorry." Or I love how you said, "I didn't know the whole story," or, "I ran to conclusions," or, "I don't know if what I said was very helpful to you." And not going into, "I meant to do this and I meant to do that, blah blah blah." Just like a few words. And most often people will gain respect for you for trying to be accountable and make sure that they're feeling okay.

Amy Morin:
I think so too. So before you go, I would love to-

Kelsey Crowe:
I love talking with you Amy. Don't let me go.

Amy Morin:
It's fun. It's fun because I get all of these ideas. I just want to run through some things. So potential situations, can you just give us an example, I know there's no right answer you would give to say, but can you just give us an example of what you might say in these situations?

Kelsey Crowe:
Sure.

Amy Morin:
Let's say you discover you have a friend whose spouse has cancer. What might you say to your friend?

Kelsey Crowe:
"I'm so sorry, this sucks. How are you doing with it?" And that part's really important, because some people actually can feel optimistic about a diagnosis, whereas I would immediately go to the worst, right? So I might before just say, "That sucks, I'm so sorry, you must be so afraid," and load all these negative things. So I would just say, "I'm so sorry." You could say that sucks because that's what you think. "How are you doing with it?"

Amy Morin:
What if you learn one of your coworkers is going through a divorce, but they haven't said it to you directly?

Kelsey Crowe:
If they haven't said it to you directly and you are not friends with them, I wouldn't bring it up. People can feel very sensitive about divorces because it does bring up a sense of personal failure and the boundaries can be mixed. However, if it's somebody who you like and know and eventually you would hear about it, I would say something. I would say, "Hey, I hear you're going through a divorce. I don't know how you're feeling about it." Because for some people divorce is like great news. "But it can be a lot of work sometimes, so if I can help you at all with stuff at the office, let me know." Because it's true. Divorce can be very time consuming and very distracting.

Amy Morin:
Yes. Okay, one more. Let's say your neighbor has a parent who passed away.

Kelsey Crowe:
I go to the neighbor, one neighbor, I didn't even know her name, but she always waved at me when I would walk the dog and we would talk about the weather. So I came by and brought flowers to her house and I just said I was sorry. You could just leave the flowers without even saying anything if you wanted to, if you're uncomfortable with those situations.

Amy Morin:
I love it. Well, thank you for those tips and strategies and the assurance that there isn't a right thing to say, but that we can develop empathy and practice using wise words that might offer somebody some comfort. Even if we don't offer them something that
promises their future’s going to be bright, we can just at least offer them our faith that they're going to get through whatever it is they're going through.

Kelsey Crowe:
Just by offering our presence and our acknowledgement and not running away is sometimes the most that we can do and we should do it.

Amy Morin:
Well, Kelsey Crowe, thank you so much for being on the Very Well Mind podcast.

Kelsey Crowe:
Oh, thank you for having me, Amy. I've really enjoyed our conversation. Thank you.

Amy Morin:
Me too.

Amy Morin:
Welcome to The Therapist's Take. This is the part of the show where I'll break down Kelsey's mental strength-building strategies and share how you can apply them to your own life. Here are three of my favorite strategies that Kelsey shared.

**Number one: ask, "How is it going for you now?"** I love that Kelsey suggested this question. It can apply to almost every situation, and it doesn't require you to make an assumption about how the other person is doing. After all, it's not up to you to decide whether they should be sad about what happened or just grateful to be alive. Asking this question also gives the other person an opportunity to talk if they want to, without prying. If they say they're fine or they turn the subject back to you, it might mean they're not interested in sharing their feelings right now. But they might also welcome the opportunity to talk about what they're going through, and they might be relieved that you are interested in listening.

**Number two: acknowledge your experiences if there's likely shame involved.** Kelsey says sharing about our experiences can be helpful if you think the other person might be ashamed of something. Briefly acknowledging that you too have struggled with a similar problem or experience might help the other person feel more comfortable talking. So you might say something like, "I remember feeling discouraged when I got fired," or "I remember how awful I felt when my home got foreclosed on." But be wary of sharing too much information about yourself and making it about you. Instead, try to stay focused on the other person, and don't insist you know exactly what they're going through, even if you've experienced something similar.
And number three: do something kind. You don’t always need to offer just words to someone. Instead, you might offer to take action. I like that Kelsey talks about kind gestures and how those little things we might do can be really powerful to someone who's struggling. If you have a loved one who's going through a hard time, find something that you can do for them. Send a gift or perform a chore, run an errand, or just do something nice. Those little things you could do for someone might make a big difference. Not only might you relieve some of their stress right now, but they might remember those things down the road too when they’re looking back on what helped them get through a tough time. And I like that Kelsey said, "Don't expect a response or a thank you note or anything like that." If they don't respond, it doesn't mean they didn't appreciate it. Instead, they might just be too overwhelmed to take any action in that moment.

So those are three of Kelsey's strategies that I highly recommend. Ask, "How is this going for you now?", acknowledge your experience if you suspect the other person might be ashamed, and do something kind for people who are going through a tough time. If you want more of Kelsey's tips, check out her book. It's called *There Is No Good Card for This*. And it's filled with actionable strategies that can help you decide what to say or do when someone you know is going through a tough time.

If you know someone who could benefit from learning about what to say when someone is in pain, share this message with them. Simply sharing a link to this episode could help someone feel better and grow stronger. Do you want free access to my online course? It's called “10 Mental Strength Exercises That Will Help You Reach Your Greatest Potential.” To get your free pass, all you have to do is leave us a review on Apple Podcasts or Spotify. Then, send us a screenshot of your review. Our email address is podcast@verywell.com. We'll reply with your all-access pass to the course.

Thank you for hanging out with me today and for listening to *The Verywell Mind Podcast! And as always, a big thank you to my show's producer (who once sent me a really kind message when he learned my grandmother had passed away long before we even worked together), Nick Valentin.*