

## Bereavement Services

## 11 Words to help you say good bye

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*Sam was a hard worker and a good provider. He and Sally had been married for 63 years and when she died he noted that a light had gone out of his life. Sally had been in charge of the home and family. One of her daughters said that Sally set the emotional tone—she was the one the children talked to when there were problems. Sam could fix anything, except broken hearts. He used to say that he was incompetent with words of emotions. Three of Sam's four children were frequent visitors as he declined. His daughters arranged for caregivers and kept the cupboards stocked. His older son took over the finances. The youngest son, Jon, lived on the other side of the continent. Since the death of his mother, he rarely visited, although he was aware of his father's illness. Sam and Jon always had a rocky relationship. Jon was a photographer who took after Sally with his ability to read people and emotions. Before Jon's visit, Sam's daughter gave Sam a short book, The Four Things that Matter Most: A Book about Living by Ira Byock. In the book, which Sam skimmed, he found 11 words that he could easily say to Jon. Both Jon and Sam found that the words began to repair a broken relationship.*

Ira Byock suggests that 11 words might help us say good-bye, and then hello, a little more easily and cleanly. They are:

Please forgive me.

I forgive you.

Thank you.

I love you.


**Forgiveness:** In all relationships, it is easy to step on toes. In challenging relationships, there are usually bigger issues that have ruptured the bonds. We become entrenched in a position, waiting for peace offerings that never

arrive. Forgiveness may not be readily offered but it can have tremendous healing power.

When we ask for forgiveness, we recognize that we have not always been right or that our approach may not always have been the only way for another to go. We might admit we failed in a task or role, in spite of all our best efforts. It is not even necessary to list all the failings, as one might in confession. A person might state what they know to be true, like "I demanded a lot" or "I always wanted the best for you," before saying, "Please forgive me."

"I forgive you" implies that a person can let go of grudges. A close relationship may still be elusive but the anger and hurt feelings might be set aside. We might discover a sense of peace as a result of forgiveness. Remember, the act of asking for and granting forgiveness is the focus. Explanations can lead to retrenchment. Let simple, sincere words state the reality, "I goofed; forgive me."

**Gratitude:** In all relationships, even the rocky ones, we give and receive. Sometimes, as illnesses loom or death approaches, we become much more aware of the gifts we have received in this life—fidelity, friendship, amazement, grandchildren, one more day to breathe. In the opening story, Jon was not aware that his father carried a picture of Sally in his wallet. His father often showed the picture of his beautiful wife and each time he noted that Jon had taken the picture in a high school photography class. Sam *spoke with pride* of his son the photographer, even though Sam rarely *spoke to* Jon. Sam found he could easily name the gifts Jon had given, starting with the photo and stretching



across the years. He wound up saying, “Thank you for being my son.”

**Love:** We love those people who have shared our lives, even if the words are not easily spoken. Sometimes people need to hear or read the words. Sometimes actions just are not enough, partly because loving actions may have been overshadowed by hurts or slights. Unfortunately, our brains hold on to angry, painful moments, while the loving tidbits can easily slip away, unnoted and unremembered. Again, the words do not have to be flowery or even spoken. A simple note might allow one to attest to a lifetime of gruff love. “Love ya” may suffice.

In the best possible scenario, this might be a two-way street, with time for the other person to say their 11 words. But this is not necessary. Letters or cards can be used, or even an inscription in a book. Byock talks about the power of the words, for both the dying and the living. Words can repair relationships and bring a sense of peace. They can leave a legacy, while offering the truth to grieving people. Above all, when you make these 11 words your own, remember to KISS (keep it simple & sincere).