

Offering condolences in a digital age

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How do we comfort others in this digital age? Is a text message or emoji enough? When, pray tell, should we actually use the phone to call? Or talk face-to-face?!

A recent *New York Times* commentary, "[The Art of Condolence](#)" by author Bruce Feiler, wades into these choppy waters of shifting cultural expectations. Penned after Feiler's own mighty struggle to write a condolence letter upon the death of a teenager in his community, in the essay Feiler reflects upon the condolence letter genre, and then shares seven helpful tips.

The tips seem quite reasonable, actually, but I was struck instead by the framing of the piece. In the introduction, Feiler notes,

But these days, as Facebooking, Snapchatting, or simply ignoring friends has become fashionable, the rules of expressing sympathy have become muddled at best, and concealed in an onslaught of emoji at worst. "Sorry about Mom. Sad face, sad face, crying face, heart, heart, unicorn.

I take the point, I suppose, that changing patterns of communication are requiring new decisions about what's most appropriate when. And, Feiler's sixth tip addresses the issue in a general way: "Facebook is not enough." Of course it isn't.

Two things seem missing in Feiler's quick pass at digital grieving (by the way, a group I'm working with may present some related research down the line). First, the strength of the relationship with the person mourning matters enormously.

If the grieving party is a close friend, or mourning because of a close friend or relative of mine, of course I will write a hand-written note of condolence. But Facebook and other social media tools extend network relationships well beyond what was possible in the past. So, if a friend of a friend's cousin who I met at a party once three years ago posts a Facebook update upon a death in the family, it wouldn't actually be appropriate to send a hand-written note. In that case, using

Facebook as a communication platform seems fine.

Second, heavy users of digital communication tools—often, but not always, young people—are actually quite savvy about the etiquette associated with them. Sure, they use them to stay *really* connected with one another, to express themselves, and to support one another, but they also know when that connection should go offline. It's not as if users of digital communication tools can't write hand-written notes, or grieve face-to-face or on the phone. In fact, they have strong B.S. detectors and can sniff out inauthentic communication from a mile away.

Of course, mourning rituals and cultural expectations around death, dying, and grieving will continue to shift. Feiler, I'm quite certain, did not write his letter with a quill pen and parchment. But let's also remember that many who use digital communication tools are keyed-into a sophisticated etiquette already. I wonder what tips they might give us.

Originally posted at [Copeland's blog](#)