



## THE 20/10/30 LIST

**20 things I wish you knew [and why]**

**10 things I'll never forget**

**30 helpful things to say and do**

compiled for first responders by families of water tragedies

[www.wavesofhopeboating.org](http://www.wavesofhopeboating.org)

**First responders are special people with big hearts who bravely endure seeing some of humanity's worst moments.**

**Kelly Helbig**, A Waves of Hope Mom



**This information is compiled from “real-life” stories of families who have suffered sudden loss as a result of a water tragedy.**

By its very definition, “sudden death” is more likely to occur among children, teens and healthy adults. This means that people’s lives are – in an instant – ripped apart by the death or critical injury of someone central to their life. Sudden trauma has a profound and lasting impact on survivors, witnesses, victims, as well as water rescue and recovery personnel. First responders are critical links in the emotional trauma chain. At a time when families most need it, the ability to connect with accurate information and compassionate guidance is critical. Effective on-scene interaction can be the difference maker in reducing post-traumatic stress triggers and pointing survivors in a direction of recovery after the most devastating of personal tragedies. The goal of this document is to provide an inside look and guidance from the families who are traveling the road of grief after losing someone they love to the water.

**First responders have the power to make the on-ramp to this difficult new road smoother.**

# 20 things I wish you knew [and why] compiled by families of water tragedies



- 1 I wish you knew the power of your kindness, gentleness and honesty. [I may not be able to show it, but I'll remember it forever. I promise.]
- 2 I wish you'd explain the situation factually, yet compassionately. [No matter how difficult, please communicate clearly, honestly, directly.]
- 3 I wish you'd remember I'm within earshot, even if I'm motionless. [If I'm able to hear, what you say will likely stay with me forever.]
- 4 I wish you'd avoid "death talk" around me ("he's DOA, she'll bleed out, etc.") [If you're speaking of me or my loved one, it's a tough way to find out.]
- 5 I wish you knew how much it helps when you answer my questions. [Even if it's "I don't know but will help you find out." Being heard helps.]
- 6 I wish you'd refer to my lost loved one (or me if I'm the victim) by name. [It helps to know you took the time to remember who you're helping.]
- 7 I wish, if available, you'd assign a buddy not working on the victim, to me. [I need a caring, compassionate, non-clinical voice in this storm.]
- 8 I wish you knew the impact of your incident report to our family. [We read it. An inaccurate report adds a fresh layer of pain to our pain.]
- 9 I wish you knew how important it is for me to be near my child. [I won't interfere with your efforts, but I MUST be near my child.]
- 10 I wish you'd allow yourself to be human, as this is the worst day of our life. [It's okay to feel things with us, even while being professional.]
- 11 I wish you'd use short, calm and focused directions. [My mind is racing and scattered. You may have to repeat yourself.]
- 12 I wish you'd assign someone to help me do simple things, like make a call. [I feel like I'm caught in a tornado. Even the simple things are hard.]
- 13 I wish you'd refrain from judgment before knowing the whole story. [Drowning incidents can come with assumptions that aren't true.]
- 14 I wish you knew that I need to be able to SEE my child's body. [Being told I have to wait 2-3 days for the autopsy? That's simply torture.]
- 15 I wish you wouldn't (and hope you don't) take things personally. [The pain is unreal. No control of what I'm saying, doing, or screaming.]
- 16 I wish you'd avoid discussing negative outcomes in front of the victim. [Even if they are unconscious.]
- 17 I wish you'd refrain from predicting a positive outcome. [Saying "I see this all the time" and "he's gonna be alright" won't help.]
- 18 I wish, if able, you'd explain details of what's happening as things unfold. [Understanding the details helps an out of control situation feel less so.]
- 19 I wish a chaplain or a critical incident professional could be there. [We desperately need emotional support during this time.]
- 20 I wish you knew how much it means when you say, "I'll remember." [Thank you. That matters so much. Because I can never forget.]



# 10 (good) things I'll never forget

compiled by families of water tragedies

- 1 MY FIRST MEETING:** Within two months of losing my son, I asked to meet with the agency that oversees lakes in our state. I was flabbergasted, confused, desperate to create change, heartbroken and angry, all at the same time. The man who leads boating education sat patiently with me for three hours as I asked questions, sought answers and shared my story. The one thing I will never forget are his tears. He didn't have all the answers, but his compassion told me everything I needed to know. Every year, this same man shows up at the annual event I host to honor my son. It means more than he can ever know.
- 2 A WARM BLANKET:** The night of my son's accident, the family next to the launch site brought us warm blankets, invited us in their home while we waited and alerted family members. They even provided coffee and sandwiches (which we didn't eat). We still talk to them and they often participated with us in events for boating safety. That act of kindness will always be remembered.
- 3 A CARD FROM A STRANGER:** Shortly after our daughter's accident, a card arrived from a woman who was in the ER at the hospital. She heard our cries and felt our heartache when we learned our daughter had died. She and her family expressed such heartfelt sympathy. It meant so much that she took the time to let us know she was there in our darkest moment and had been praying for us ever since.
- 4 A RIDE ABOVE AND BEYOND:** My helicopter EMT requested to accompany me in the ambulance to the airport for my medical flight back to a hospital near home after three months of being away while they stabilized me and "put me back together." He pinned me with his helicopter pin thanking me for surviving. I will never forget that. It gave me strength and hope to keep going.
- 5 SIMPLE ACTS OF KINDNESS:** A group of friends came out the second week after the accident and mowed over three acres of lawn. One friend sent a card every week for the first year. Another two friends delivered a meal once a month, and still do. Those simple acts of kindness mean more than anyone could possibly know.
- 6 REVERENCE FOR OUR BOY:** The sheriff did two things the next day as the search continued that really helped us. 1) He said, "We're not leaving until we find him." That was so important that they didn't give up. 2) When he told us they had found him, he agreed to take our boy to another location so family, friends and media would not see him in that condition. Reverence for our boy was so important. At the location where they brought him ashore, they had covered him in a "white" canvas, not black or blue. That was a relief.
- 7 THERE ARE NO WORDS:** The nurses at the hospital were incredible. Honest, yet soft, checking on us as well as our son. They became our advocates when the doctors wanted to put our son on life support after we'd made the painful decision to take him off. The doctors got angry at us, but the nurses stood up for us. I stayed at the hospital for 12 days and the nurses never told me to go home or get rest, but allowed me space to do what I needed, even if I didn't know what that was. They would often sit and hold my hand without saying a word.
- 8 HE CAME TO THE FUNERAL:** The first responders brought my son a gift the next day and sent us a card. One of them even came to his funeral. My mother and I went to the station to talk to the shift that worked on my son. I was able to share what he was like and how much I appreciated their kindness. They listened and asked questions. It was helpful for all of us.
- 9 A LINE OF RESPECT:** One particular act of kindness that is forever pressed into my heart and mind is what happened when we left the hospital. Every first responder, health care professional and officers on the scene lined the hallways after my son died and my wife and I were leaving the emergency room. That show of respect will never, ever leave me.
- 10 YOU'RE GONNA MAKE IT:** As I lay in the hospital absorbing my new reality of being an amputee, a local prosthetist who had lost his leg as a child visited me. He shared his experience with me and showed me that I would not only survive, but thrive. That was not only very kind, it was a game changer. Doctors only ever tell you what you'll never do again. He was the first person to ever tell me that I'd be okay!

# 10 (not so good) things I'll never forget

compiled by families of water tragedies



- 1 HOW DARE SHE:** At the hospital, we were holding our deceased daughter. I wanted to cut some strands of her beautiful hair to keep (for reasons at the time I didn't understand, but am now thankful I did). The nurse interrupted telling us, "No no you don't want to do that. She won't look right in her coffin." I was sickened and mortified. How dare she feel she had a voice in this final moment?
- 2 NO ONE WOULD TELL US:** I arrived at the hospital hysterical, knowing nothing more than "there'd been an accident" at the lake. At that point, the thought of my child actually not surviving was impossible. It wasn't "is he alive?" rather, "how bad is it?" No one told us anything. No one would take us to him. It's as if they were frozen. How I wish someone would've taken calm control, gently led us aside, and told us clearly, yet compassionately, what happened. My husband finally asked one simple question, "Did he make it?" The one-word, monosyllabic response was deafening. "No."
- 3 A NEGATIVE OUTLOOK:** For me, as a survivor, and now an amputee, one of the biggest things was overcoming a negative encounter I had. I met a woman in the rehab hospital who was very angry and kept saying she wished she was dead (when her injuries did not compare to mine.) That was a huge turning point for me in learning that I had a choice to make in how I was going to respond to my pain. I chose to overcome.
- 4 HELP ME UNDERSTAND WHAT HAPPENED AND WHY:** My son was transported to ER and resuscitation efforts continued for an hour more, maybe two. Things were a blur. I so wish what had been done afterwards was a debrief from the doctor in charge... not that day, but maybe within a month of my son's death. It would've been helpful to know what measures were taken, why transport to a larger facility was not done, etc. The doctor talked to us briefly near the end, but I could neither receive or understand anything at the time.
- 5 DID HE KNOW HOW TO SWIM?** How many times did I hear, "Did he know how to swim?" That question was a horrible one, and makes me feel like a bad mom. I've since realized that people are trying to find a way to distance themselves from the possibility that such a horrific thing could happen to themselves or their child. My son drowned 200 feet from shore; he obviously could swim well enough to get that far.
- 6 I NEEDED TO BE NEAR MY CHILD:** On scene, first responders continued CPR on my son. There was also a young police officer there. I was about 20 yards away and approached my son and his responders. I just needed to be near him, pray over him, from a few feet away. The officer saw me approach, said something, then moved his hand to his holster as if to draw his firearm. I will never forget that act. I felt so violated. I don't remember his words, but his action was clear that I was not allowed anywhere near my child. That memory will always be piercingly painful.
- 7 A TOXIC GRIEVER:** The first parent who reached out to me didn't help. She told me that her life was ruined, she got divorced (because that happens to everyone) and she talked all about her experience losing her son. I was afraid to talk to any other parents after that. After about a year, I started working in the drowning prevention field, and that helped.
- 8 VICTIMS, NOT CRIMINALS:** Because the scene was an investigation site, our other two sons were not allowed to come to our side for many hours. Also, there was one investigator who was too persistent on interviewing my husband and I (separately) rather than focusing on the search for our son. We were victims, not criminals.
- 9 YOU DON'T KNOW:** In a conversation with a respected state official, I shared that while I was profoundly grateful to the first responders who recovered my son from the lake, it was simply too painful to reach out to them. He replied with unwavering confidence, "Well, you have to do that. If you don't, you'll never heal." His bravado (and ignorance) surprised, and frankly, angered me. Grief is unique. What works for some doesn't work for all. It's important to respect that.
- 10 PAINFUL PONTIFICATION:** Soon after I started my drowning prevention work, I shared my child's story with a couple of folks at a water safety conference. They immediately began pontificating with each other about the probable technicalities of my child's death, comparing their opinions of what actually caused the drowning. As a mother, the absolute hardest thing to think about is my child needing air and not being able to get it. I stood in stunned silence as the banter continued back and forth and back and forth. It's as if I wasn't there. I excused myself, walked to the bathroom, and threw up.

# 30 helpful things to say and do

compiled by families of water tragedies



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| 1  | Speak gently, considerately and always, honestly.                         | 16 | Use “care words”, not “technical words”, with the family.               |
| 2  | Tell them you care. Tell them you’re with them.                           | 17 | If family members want to assist, find a way to let them. It’s helpful. |
| 3  | Find dry clothes for family members who were in the water.                | 18 | Use their loved one’s name, not “victim” or “missing.”                  |
| 4  | Help provide a “private” place for the family to gather and wait.         | 19 | If recovery, tell them “We won’t stop until [Name] is found.”           |
| 5  | If they need to be near or see [Name], warn them, but let them.           | 20 | Don’t say things like “that’s a good sign” or “when he gets home.”      |
| 6  | Designate one person to stay with the family.                             | 21 | Don’t say things like “there’s no hope.” (Even if there likely isn’t.)  |
| 7  | Choose one family member to communicate with, not the group.              | 22 | Don’t be afraid to show your tears. Your tears are not weakness.        |
| 8  | Look them in the eye. Be willing to be vulnerable. Be bold.               | 23 | Don’t compare their story to others you’ve seen.                        |
| 9  | Compassion is always the constant, no matter how the family reacts.       | 24 | Afterwards, if you can, send a card or note. It will matter a lot.      |
| 10 | Be human. Your sensitivity (or lack thereof) will stay with them forever. | 25 | Don’t be offended if you don’t receive a response. They’re reeling.     |
| 11 | Call a qualified chaplain or grief professional to be on scene.           | 26 | If you’re able, visit them in the hospital. They will never forget it.  |
| 12 | The chaplain’s phone should always be on vibrate.                         | 27 | Consider attending the funeral in full dress as a show of respect.      |
| 13 | Tell them what happened in clear, simple language. They need details.     | 28 | Tell them “I’m so sorry.” ... “I’ll remember.” ... “You’re not alone.”  |
| 14 | Answer questions, even about painful details. They need to know.          | 29 | Give the family a Waves of Hope card, and a hug.                        |
| 15 | If you don’t know, say, “I don’t know, but will do my best to find out.”  | 30 | Take care of yourself. And know how grateful we are to and for you.     |



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The 20/10/30 List is based on Waves of Hope family survey feedback.  
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