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7 things not to say to someone in a financial crisis

By [Erica Sandberg](#)

What do you say to someone who confides in you to having severe money woes? Do you chide them for not being more responsible? Or do you change the subject?

Knowing the right way to respond can prevent you from trivializing their situation. Experts detail seven things not to say when someone confesses their financial troubles -- and offer up what are more appropriate responses.

1. Don't say: "You shouldn't have overspent." Resist pointing out the obvious, not just because it sounds condescending, but you could be wrong. When Greg Staffa, of Saint Cloud, Minn., lost his home to foreclosure, a [local paper covered his story](#). "They took a photo of me clearing out my house and all the people saw was the 4-year-old television," says Staffa. "People would say, 'You must have bought more than you could afford.'" Not true. In fact, Staffa had been approved for a \$250,000 mortgage, but purchased conservatively at \$100,000 less than that sum. He could afford it until his job disappeared.



Do say: "You're not alone. Millions of people descend into debt due to emergencies." That's the truth. "It's easy to judge someone after they fall," says Staffa. "But learn all the pieces of the story and not just a snapshot."

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Low Interest	10.29%
Balance Transfer	12.59%
Business	13.13%
Student	13.16%
Cash Back	14.13%
Airline	14.63%

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2. Don't say: "Gee, it looks like rain." Personal discomfort can cause you to change the subject, but resist, says Chad Nehring, a financial planner and partner in Conceptual Investment Advisors in Appleton, Wis. "When someone divulges this information, it's a true cry for help," says Nehring, who speaks from experience. He's a self-described "reformed spender" who was \$33,000 in credit card debt at age 25. Not being able to pay bills is painful, he says, but so is getting shut out by a friend when you're ready to change course.

Do say: "Tell me more." A kind demeanor and willingness to just listen can be incredibly valuable. If they're coming to you, says Nehring, "They want to get it off their chest and out in the open. Sometimes they just need a sounding board."

It's easy to judge someone after they fall. But learn all the pieces of the story and not just a snapshot.

-- Greg Staffa
Former airline baggage handler

3. Don't say: "My sister's brother-in-law says ..." Never spread rumors or provide poor advice from sketchy sources. For instance, if the person says he's considering contacting a [credit counseling agency](#), telling him that you heard that they're all terrible is a bad idea. It's not accurate and may prevent that person from getting critical assistance.

Do say: "You need to contact a professional." "For someone who is struggling and reaches out for help, I would recommend pointing them toward financial education resources," says Randy Jarvis, president of Union National Bank in Sparta, Wisc. "Adults can turn to free online sources. For example, the FDIC has a number of [tutorials available](#) on its website." Additionally, referrals to proper agencies and experts takes the responsibility off your shoulders, and you won't be guilty of giving damaging counsel.

4. Don't say: "I totally understand" (when you don't). Empathy is wonderful, but not when it's empty. If you haven't experienced how horrible being on the brink of bankruptcy is, don't pretend you know exactly what they're going through, says Reeta Wolfsohn, founder of the Center for Financial Social Work in Asheville, N.C. No one wants a disingenuous response.

Do say: "I'm so sorry you're going through this." It's OK if you can't totally relate. A sincere attempt at understanding counts enough. "Be kind," says Wolfsohn. "If you can't share a solution, ask open-ended questions, such as, 'Do you know where to go for help?' or 'What are you thinking of doing?'"

5. Don't say: "I hope you learned your lesson." Ouch. Even if you know the person has made

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terrible decisions with their money and credit, being mean is cruel. "It's easy to be self-righteous," says Wolfsohn. "In most cases, no good will come from it."

Do say: Nothing. When tempted to scold, remind yourself of the classic adage, "If you can't say anything nice, don't say anything at all," says Wolfsohn. Then reword the reprimand: "It's an awful situation, but I'm sure you learned so much from it. I know you don't ever want to be in this position again." Then, let him take it from there -- he'll probably list off what he did gain.

6. Don't say: "You poor thing." That person came to you for guidance and friendship, not pity. According to Nehring, calling someone "poor" can be translated into "pathetic." It means, "Boy, am I glad I'm not in your shoes," says Nehring, and if he wasn't depressed before, he certainly will be after that.

Do say: "You're strong, and you will survive this." Be compassionate yet positive with your statements. Unlike for terminal illnesses, there are often cures to money woes. To realize what they are, though, the person must maintain realistic faith that they're out there and achievable. Conveying a sense of power is always the right thing to do.

If you can't share a solution, ask open-ended questions, such as, 'Do you know where to go for help?' or 'What are you thinking of doing?'

*-- Reeta Wolfsohn
Founder, the Center for Financial Social Work*

7. Don't say: "Let's grab dinner/drinks/coffee and talk about it." When someone is trying to figure out how to keep their lights on, they're not going to want to spend \$50 on dinner and drinks. It's agonizing to not be able to afford even the simplest of life's pleasures. Think before you speak, so you don't have to pull your foot out of your mouth later.

Do say: "Come over! I'll cook and we can talk over dinner." Nothing conveys love and caring like a homemade meal. Besides, it relieves the pressure on an empty wallet, says Nehring. "Anytime you're talking over food, the barriers come down." And when they do, you can truly become the caring, supportive friend that a person in dire straits craves.

Chances are good that you know someone suffering from serious money problems. When they're ready to talk, it may be into your ear -- so be ready to soothe with the right responses.

See related: [Credit card addiction: How to break the spending cycle](#), [When happy meds lead to depressing debt](#)

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