FREE GUIDE

FOR FINANCIAL ADVISORS

The Grief-Ready Advisor

The 10 things to say — and never say — when a client is facing loss.

Kathi Balasek.

GRIEF-READY COMMUNICATION

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the grief-ready advisor

10 things to say — and never say

The words to reach for — and the ones to avoid — when a client is facing loss.

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Widows are roughly three times more likely to leave their advisor than other households. Most don't complain. They don't explain. They just move the money.

It's rarely about performance. It's about a phone call — the one where a client says the words *“she died,”* and the advisor, who genuinely cares, reaches for a sympathy card and *“I'm so sorry for your loss,”* and then, as fast as possible, steers back to the paperwork.

That advisor didn't fail because they didn't care. They failed because no one ever taught them what to say next. That's the whole gap. And it's fixable.

This guide gives you ten specific moves for the conversations that decide whether a client stays or quietly walks — a death, a divorce, a diagnosis, caregiving, retirement, and the other life transitions every client book carries. Not therapy. Not soft skills. The exact language that protects the relationship, and grows it, when it's most at risk.

> *The client you serve well through loss is the client who stays — and the one who sends you three more like them. Retention and growth come from the same skill.*

You'll know what to say. Let's get you ready. — Kathi

Before we start: a 60-second self-check

Score yourself honestly. One point for each you can say yes to right now.

- [ ] I have a plan for the first call after a client's spouse dies — beyond “I'm so sorry.”
- [ ] I know what to say when a client tells me they're going through a divorce.
- [ ] I know which well-meaning phrases actually damage trust (and I've stopped using them).
- [ ] I can recognize grief fog in a client who hasn't had a death — a caregiver, a retiree, an empty nester.
- [ ] I understand grief well enough to slow a client down instead of rushing them to a decision.
- [ ] Everyone who talks with my clients responds the same way when loss hits — not just me.

0–2
You're exposed. The next hard call is a coin flip, and the odds aren't in your favor.

3–4
You have good instincts, but no system. That inconsistency is where clients — and their referrals — slip away.

5–6
You're ahead of most. This guide sharpens what you already do well — and shows you the firm-wide version.

01 Name the loss out loud

The single most common mistake is speed — rushing past the loss to get to the numbers, because the numbers feel safe. Don't. The advisor who names the loss becomes the advisor who is trusted with the assets.

- Say the person's name and the specific loss: *“I heard about the death of your husband, Marcus. I've been thinking about you.”*
- Don't default to “passed away.” Mirror the client's language; when in doubt, “died” is honest and human.
- Silence is not neutral. It reads as *I don't know what to do with you now.* That's the message that moves accounts.

02 Understand what empathy actually is

Empathy isn't putting yourself in their shoes — that's a myth that makes it about you. Empathy is connecting through a shared emotion and staying there.

- **Presence over solutions.** You are not there to fix the loss. You're there so they aren't alone in it.
- **Listen to learn, not to reply.** Don't prepare your next sentence while they're still talking.
- One genuine question beats ten reassurances.

03 Know what NOT to say

Grief isn't yours to rank. The moment you judge a loss — by the relationship, the age of the person who died, or how they died — you've told the client their grief has to justify itself. Almost every damaging phrase does one of five things.

THEY SAY	THE CLIENT HEARS
“Were you close?” / “You weren't married anymore, right?”	You're deciding whether I'm allowed to grieve this.
“At least she lived a long life.” / “She had a good run.”	A long life is supposed to make this hurt less. It doesn't.
“At least he's not suffering anymore.” / “What kind of cancer was it?”	You're turning my loss into a circumstance to evaluate, not a person I loved.
“I know exactly how you feel.” / “At least you had time to prepare.”	This just became about you, or about how my grief should be smaller.
“Everything happens for a reason.” / “She's in a better place.”	You're rushing me to the other side of a feeling I'm still inside of.

The test: if a phrase measures the loss, explains it, or tries to fix the feeling, it's a judgment — not a comfort. Ask yourself, *“am I inviting or closing a conversation?”*

04 Know exactly what to say instead

Steal these. They work because they name the loss, honor the person, and ask nothing of the griever.

SAY THIS	WHY IT LANDS
"I was so saddened to hear about the death of your husband, Marcus."	Specific. Names him. No platitude.
"The loss of your mom, Adele, is huge. I was so lucky to know her."	Honors the relationship, not just the fact.
"I'll always remember Priya and the love she showed her children."	Gives a memory back to the griever.
"I'm so sorry to hear about Danny. As long as I live, I won't forget him."	For the loss of a child or sibling — losses people most fear naming.
"This is a major life transition. We'll take it one step at a time."	Acknowledges the weight; removes the pressure.

05 Ask thoughtful questions — then stop talking

The right question opens a door no financial review ever will. But match the question to the moment. In grief fog, a wide-open question — *"How are you doing?"* — can feel like homework. Narrow the door: a question built on *which, where, when,* or *how* gives them something they can actually answer.

- *"What are you most worried about losing right now?"* — the most powerful question in this guide, but read the room first.
- *"Would this week or next feel more manageable for a quick call?"* — a *when*, two options, not a blank calendar.
- *"Where would you feel most comfortable meeting — your home, the office, or a call?"*
- *"Which one thing would help most right now — and who can help?"*
- *"Would you rather I walk you through this, or put it in writing so you can read it when you're ready?"*

Notice: none of these are about money. Every answer tells you how to serve her — financially and relationally.

06 Recognize loss that isn't a death

Every client book is full of grief that never gets flowers. If you only see loss when someone dies, you're missing most of it — and the client knows you missed it.

- **Divorce and separation** — a loss event with legal and financial consequences, not the other way around.
- **Health and identity** — a diagnosis, cognitive decline, infertility, disability.
- **Work and money** — job loss, a business sold, a career-ending injury, the professional identity that went with it.
- **Life transitions** — retirement, the empty nest, a move, caregiving for a parent.

Each carries secondary losses — the cascade behind the obvious event. A divorce isn't just the end of a marriage; it's the loss of a retirement plan, a family structure, a social circle, a sense of self. The advisor who names even one of those becomes the one who actually sees the client.

07 Handle divorce as a loss, not a transaction

Most advisors ask a divorcing client, *"What assets are being divided?"* Right question for a legal event. Wrong question for a loss event — and divorce is a loss event. She's grieving four futures: the retirement they planned, the identity she held, the family structure she knew, and the financial life she built.

- Ask *"What feels most uncertain for you right now?"* before you ask about the house.
- Use choices, options, considerations — never "decisions." In grief fog, "decide" feels like a demand.
- Watch for anticipatory grief — she may have been grieving the marriage long before the papers were signed.

08 Slow the decisions down

Grief fog is real and neurological — reduced concentration, impaired memory, compromised decision-making, documented well into the first and second year after a loss. A client rushed into a choice during grief fog will later associate you with the pressure, not the help.

- Never push a major financial decision unless it's genuinely urgent.
- Leave a one-page summary of next steps so they don't have to hold it all in their head.
- Say: *"There's no rush on this. When you're ready, I'll walk you through the options."*

09 Match the channel to the moment

Call, text, card, or email — the medium sends a message before your words do.

- Closer relationships warrant a call or a handwritten card. Colleagues and acquaintances may prefer a thoughtful text or email.
- Loss is overwhelming — many people prefer a message they can return to when they're ready over a call they have to perform on.
- Mark the calendar: a text on the death anniversary — *"Thinking of you and Marcus today"* — is the kind of thing clients tell their friends about.

10 Make it consistent — this is where firms win

A great loss conversation from you is a personality. A great loss conversation from every person who touches your clients is a competitive advantage. Your investment philosophy is standardized. Your compliance is standardized. Why isn't your communication during life's hardest moments?

- When your most empathetic advisor retires, does the way your firm shows up leave with them?
- Could a newer advisor handle the death-of-a-spouse call as well as your best one?
- If the answer is "it depends who picks up the phone," that's not a training gap — it's a retention risk hiding in plain sight.

The firms that build shared language for loss and life transition don't just retain clients. They become the firm families talk about at the dinner table.

What becomes possible

When you get these ten moves right, retention and growth stop being two problems and become one skill.

- **The client stays** — instead of quietly moving her assets after a loss.
- **She refers.** Women make an average of 26 referrals to their advisor over a lifetime — more than double what men make.
- **Her children enter the relationship** — the next generation of wealth stays with you.
- **You become differentiated.** Most advisors compete on performance. You compete on presence.

> *Through 2048, an estimated $54 trillion will pass first to widows — more than 95% of it to women. The advisor who serves a client well through loss holds the relationship, the referrals, and the next generation.*

Your next step

You now have the language for the loss conversations you can see coming. The next step is the system for all of them — every loss type, every scenario, the words ready before the phone rings.

Want the full framework? The Grief-Ready Communication System is the complete self-paced course behind this guide — built specifically for financial professionals.

Want the words without the wait? The AI Script Vault gives you ready-to-use, grief-literate scripts for the conversations you're facing right now.

Leading a team? Grief-Ready Communication can be built into how your whole firm shows up — one shared language, every advisor, every touchpoint.

Start here: kathibalasek.com — book a conversation, or begin the course today.

Kathi Balasek trains financial professionals to show up when life gets hard. A former university professor with 28 years in education, she was widowed young while raising five children — the lived authority behind the work. She is the founder of Grief-Ready Communication.

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 · Communication is currency. Language is your legacy.