

WHAT TO SAY TO DISAPPOINTMENT

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In sports, clichés are common, but sometimes, they serve a good purpose. Like before your teammate is about to step onto the blocks: You want to offer a cheer, and clichés come to mind. “You can do this.” “I believe in you.” “Just do this.” “Let’s go.”



These are what I call “good clichés” -- clichés that do no harm, clichés that motivate clichés that cheer. These good clichés are useful – they’re easy to remember, they’re positive, and they’re used under motivational circumstance.

But that’s dealing with motivation. What about disappointment?

We know what to say to motivate, but many times, I hear people (teammates, parents) say the wrong things to a swimmer who experiences disappointment. In the moments after a disappointing race, many of us want to say the right words. And yet, I hear post-race comments that do more harm than good.

For example, when a swimmer gets 2nd place when she really wanted to win, never say, “You barely lost!”

Never say: “Maybe if you had worked on that turn, like I told you...”

Never say: “It’s not a big deal. Swimming is not important.”

Reading this now, I’m sure all of you are shaking your heads, thinking, “I wouldn’t say those things.” And yet, many of us do.

After twenty years in this sport, and dealing with my own share of disappointment, I’m convinced the best action dealing with disappointment is a non-action: It’s best to leave disappointed swimmers alone. We -- parents, fans, teammates, peers -- love to rush to a disappointed swimmer’s aid, tell them things, prop them back up with our words. But there are so many small, backhanded compliments and/or subtle comments we say that we shouldn’t say, and we don’t even realize it. Comments that can stick long after the bruises of disappointment have faded.

There are two rules interacting with disappointment: Allow disappointed swimmers time to be alone, or, just let them know you’re there for them. If you’re a parent, a hug goes a long way. If you’re a teammate, just let them know you’re there for them.

I wish it were that easy. Every pool deck this autumn, there will be some parents/teammates/peers/friends/aunts/siblings who interject their own negative perspective on a particular race seconds after the completion of said race. Rather than give swimmers time to calm down, they shout down from the stands, “You should have tried harder!” or “We drove all the way from Ohio for that?” And so on.

(And if you think those comments are fictional exaggerations, those are exact quotes I’ve overheard from parents while their children stand there and cry. Think about that for a second.)

And so, while there are plenty of “good cliches” and “motivational cliches” out there in the world of sports, I’m here to offer a “consolation cliché” -- just something simple to say to a disappointed swimmer in the heat of the moment, if the opportunity arises.

Scenario #1:

A swimmer just misses a personal best time. They set a goal, they tried their best to achieve that goal, and they barely missed that goal. The race may have seemed “fine” or “good,” but to the swimmer, I promise, there’s nothing more disappointing than that initial shock-wave of missing a personal best time.

Don’t say: “You almost got it!” or “Better luck next time!” -- especially if it’s the end of the season.

Instead say: “I’m here for you.”

Scenario #2:

A swimmer misses an important time standard they’ve trained the entire season for.

Don’t say: “It’s okay.” It will be okay, but for the moment, to the swimmer, it is not okay. Instead, just be there, and if you’re a family member, give a hug. If someone tells me, “It’s okay,” I usually want to scream back, “No, it’s not.”

Instead say: “I’m here for you.”

Scenario #3:

A swimmer gets hurt/injured at a meet or outside-the-pool. We’ve all been there. Someone shows up to practice with a broken arm. And part of you thinks, “Well, you shouldn’t have been skateboarding, man.” Don’t think that. Because thinking that will unleash injury-prone karma upon you one day.

Don’t say: “Well, you shouldn’t have been playing football [or whatever led to injury].”

Instead say: “I’m here for you.”

Scenario #4:

A swimmer gets disqualified. To swimmers, disqualification can be the worst feeling: Not even being allowed to race, or having a personal best time wiped away because you accidentally missed a turn, is devastating to any swimmer.

Don’t say: “That official is blind. You did that correct! I’m going to yell at that official.”

And especially don’t say: “Yeah, well, next time touch the wall with both hands.”

Instead say: “I’m here for you.”

You may have noticed a theme. See the trend? In those few seconds after a disappointing performance, don’t offer suggestions or fixes or attempt to brush off the swim or bad performance. Don’t suggest that swimming isn’t important, or that the swimmer should have done this or that. If you’re a parent, offer a hug. Tell them you care. If you’re a teammate, simply be there. They may want alone time -- give them space. Critiques are for coaches, and those critiques can usually wait until Monday morning. For now, be there, be cool, be calm, and lend a shoulder to cry on. Don’t fix. Don’t critique. Don’t criticize. Don’t condescend.

Just say, “I’m here for you.”

Because when you endure disappointment, you'll want someone to just be there for you, too.