



Simple steps for everyone who sees someone who is suffering

You Can Help the Hurting

By Lynn Gardner

Every Christian wants to help those who are experiencing grief, sickness, or other tragedies. But not everything said by some Christians to the suffering actually helps them. The first article in this series listed sentences you should not speak. This week, let's consider what we can do to help those around us who are hurting.

Listen

A hurting person needs to talk because he wants someone to understand what he is experiencing. Rather than worrying about what you will say to the person, concentrate on listening to the words he shares with you. Look at the person while he talks. Survivors and sufferers can feel invisible. Let the hurting person talk when he wants, and about what he wants. Listen attentively, even if a story is repeated again and again. Listen with your heart to see and feel his pain.

Don't tell the other person how he must be feeling; let him tell you what he wants to say about his feelings. When our 34-year-old son was killed in an auto accident, some people told my wife and me that we must be upset with God. Actually, we weren't. We did not think God caused the accident. It would have been more helpful if someone had asked us whether we were upset with God.

Allow the sufferer to express guilt, sorrow, or depression. Don't judge or criticize. Don't condemn actions that might have caused the suffering. The sufferer cannot be objective enough to handle criticism.

One who is suffering may express anger or bitterness, even with God. Job appeared to be angry at the



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seeming unfairness of his suffering and wanted to argue his case directly with God. In times of extreme emotional upset, godly people may experience frustration with God. We should respond with gentleness and compassion when we hear their words of frustration.

Care

Nothing you say can eliminate the person's grief or suffering. The person must deal with it personally. Often those who help the most say the least.

Trivial platitudes and cliches do not

help. Avoid saying, "Time will heal all wounds," "Think of all you still have to be thankful for," and "It's not really so bad." It is better to say, "I can't think of what to say. But we are sorry and we are with you in your grief."

Pray

Prayer is powerful. I know personally the encouragement and comfort that comes when you know others regularly pray for you. I have a terminal lung disease. On my desk stands a card from the Bethlehem Bible College family in India. It is signed by 90 people who say they are praying daily for me. My wife and I have been blessed by many such encouragements.

Help

Often the sufferer can't think too well or organize what needs to be done. Sometimes asking, "What can I do?" only increases frustration. It is of great help when a person sees what needs to be done and goes ahead and does it. Look for practical ways to help: mow the lawn, wash the dishes, answer the phone, run errands, give transportation, babysit, shop, get the mail, care for pets, buy stamps for thank-you notes, clean the house.

On the day of the funeral for our son, a Christian friend washed and vacuumed our car and went to the store to buy my wife panty hose. It was help we needed and it was appreciated.

Remember

Loved ones who remain do not want to forget their lost loved one. Even though it is painful, the sufferer wants to talk about them. Sharing

good memories can bring joy and help one who is suffering cope with the sadness of loss. Relate the special qualities you appreciated and things you admired in the person. Use the name of the person in your communication. You haven't forgotten this person who is still important to those who remain. Remembering the loved one is important in relearning to live in a world without the loved one. The person who is gone is not replaceable, but we want to remember him.

Wait

In the words of a grieving person, "People think they have to say something—but it's their presence that counts." Suffering and grief is not a problem to be solved as much as it is a process to be experienced. In some cases you may need to say very little, but your presence says loud and clear, "I care."

Sufferers might be too weak to talk. Your presence and companionship may give the strength and support that is needed.

Touch

Illness can disfigure. A terminally ill patient said, "Touch me. I want to be accepted despite the way I may look. Inside, I'm still the same person you always knew."¹ Hold a person's hand or touch her arm while you pray with her in the hospital.

Include

It is important that we recognize everyone who is hurting and grieving. Try not to overlook anyone. A father who lost a 25-year-old son in a mountain-climbing accident said, "Now he's gone, and the family has to restructure itself. We don't just each have a gap inside us, but together a gap among us. We have to live differently with each other. We have to live around the gap. Pull out one, and everything changes."²

Cry

Jesus wept at Lazarus' grave. The ability to grieve is a God-given avenue helping us deal with the intense pain of personal tragedy and loss. After losing a loved one, going to church or hearing certain songs frequently brings tears. Crying is a natural part of the grieving process. Tell a person who is coping with a loss that you are OK with her crying.

God cares. He weeps with us. Our tears become His tears. God sees disease and death as an enemy. He is not an indifferent CEO pulling strings from Heaven. He is our merciful and loving Father who asks us to cast our cares on Him because He cares for us (1 Peter 5:7). Christ endured sufferings when on earth and is a sympathetic and merciful high priest (Hebrews 2:14-18).

Trust

God never told Job why he was suffering, but God gave Job ample evidence to trust Him. Even though he did not understand, Job kept trusting God. Many things in this life we will never fully understand.

Philip Yancey says, "The most important issue facing Christians who suffer is not 'Is God responsible?' but 'How should I react now that this terrible thing has happened?'"³

My lung disease is called idiopathic pulmonary fibrosis. "Idiopathic" means the cause is unknown. People ask me how I feel that I don't know the cause of my lung disease. It bothered me at first, but then I realized medical science doesn't know and I can't know. I decided not to worry about it, but to do what I can to be as healthy as I can be, asking for God's help and healing at every step of the way. God gives peace to those who trust in Him.

Persist

Don't just visit in the hospital or attend the funeral and then disappear.

Immediately after the crisis or loss much attention and concern is expressed. It helps for friends to continue to be supportive. Anniversaries and holidays can be hard because they highlight the absence of the loved one. If you did not send a sympathy card within a few days, send it now. It can mean a great deal, even long after the death. The grief process can last a long time. Deep loss never completely goes away. Show genuine concern even years later. Good friends keep in touch with a brief visit, a phone call, an e-mail, or note. Cards are helpful, and a personal note adds value to the card.

Encourage

We must not be gushy and sentimental in an unrealistic way, but we can obey Paul's directive to "encourage one another" (1 Thessalonians 5:11). Be honest with people who are suffering. Reinforce their strength. Express love and care for them. Really seek what is best for them. Encourage their reliance upon God.

Help sufferers to start helping others as soon as they are able. It might be later rather than sooner for some. We are all different in how we respond. A person coping with grief often withdraws. Encourage past hobbies, give rides to meetings, help that person get involved in new activities. Genuinely affirm the good they are doing and your confidence in them.

¹*The Joplin Globe*, 3 Oct. 1996, 11.

²Nicolas Wolterstorff, *Lament for a Son* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987), 99.

³Philip Yancey, *Where Is God When It Hurts?* rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), 106.

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NEXT WEEK: Why Does God Allow Suffering?