

Grief:

How To Help My Hurting Friend



by John Dobbs

Looking Back

Job chapter 2 records the earliest account of mourning with friends who have lost loved ones. In the first thirteen verses of that chapter, Job has friends who truly understand how to mourn with a friend. Unfortunately, then they begin to talk about their reflections of grief and suffering.

It is only in retrospect that I now know that I had no idea how to help a hurting friend. Even though I had read articles and heard messages about how to be a friend to the grieving... things to do and things not to do ... I still didn't know.

If you have not suffered a significant loss, this may not resonate with you. Most of us regard ourselves as friendly and loving. We feel that by nature we will know how to offer love and support. When the moment comes we believe that we will know the right words to say. I'm sure that this is what one lady thought when on the day of my son's funeral she got very close to my face and said, *"God just needed another angel so he took yours. That's just the way you have to look at it."* Being a nonviolent person I was surprised at the urges I had at that moment.

No matter the heart or the intent, there are some things that we can avoid as we try to help our hurting friends. There are some things we can do to bring relief and comfort. What we would all like to do for our hurting friends is the only thing we cannot do – remove their pain.

Grief is not a consistent experience from person to person. These ideas about how to help a hurting friend must be adjusted from person to person. Without being able to address each situation, there is a general nature to these suggestions. However, each one presents a

principle to keep in mind when ministering to the bereaved. It may be a good practice to review these before entering into the painful experience of another.

~Be Present~

When someone dies it seems that the house becomes a flurry of activity. Friends stop by. Food is brought. Relatives arrive. This in itself would be quite overwhelming if the bereaved were aware enough of their surroundings to care.

The mailbox will begin to fill up with sympathy cards. The phone will ring constantly. Sometimes gifts in the form of books and other things will be delivered. But nothing takes the place of the presence of another human being. One of the most beloved men of the Bible is Barnabas, who was also known as a 'son of comfort'. "When we grieve, we need a Barnabas to stand beside us." (Filkins, p. 51)

Our journey of grief began early in the morning after a long night of worry and uncertainty. In the pre-dawn hours Captain Jamie Hunter and another officer knocked on our door. I had been driving around looking for signs of John Robert's presence at the homes of his friends. I'll forever be sorry that I was not at home when that knock came. Captain Hunter's wife, Shirley, was the principle of Beach Elementary School while John Robert was a student there. It was a moment of violence to our system – nothing made sense. But one thing that we did – even on auto pilot – was to call friends. And they came from far and near. Our friends and neighbors even spent a few nights at our house

taking care of us, providing breakfast, cleaning a bit, hugging, and then staying hidden just out of sight until they were needed. I Thank God for all of them.

~Be Helpful~

Help is needed to perform even the simplest tasks. The bereaved has had a major shock to the system. The things that seem ordinary to you are the very things that can confuse and agitate a bereaved person.

Initially when all of the food begins to arrive, there are several things that need to be taken care of. Don't wait to be asked to make food available, re-arrange the room to allow for the crowd of people, or to prepare a list of names of those who were present. Later, as the bereaved person looks over that list they will be surprised at the number of people who came by that they do not remember.

One thing I remember clearly was that my cell phone was ringing constantly. In my heart I wanted to talk to the people who were calling, I just didn't have it in me to do so. My friend, Al Sturgeon, offered to answer those calls for me. That gave me great comfort because I knew that he would give them the information they needed instead of me having to repeat myself so many times.

Another friend, David Burkett, went with us to the funeral home and assisted with all of the arrangements. As difficult as this was, his presence made it a much easier task. David is an Estate Attorney, so he knows what has to happen during these times. More personally, though, David had endured a couple of deaths in his family recently. So, this was

fresh on his mind. Without him, I'm not sure if we would have gotten everything together for the funeral or not.

I mention these two friends – although there were many more who were helpful – because they illustrate a couple of different ways to be of assistance in a difficult moment. What a good friend needs to do is take a look around and help without being asked. That is a beautiful service to others.

~Be Quiet~

Everyone has had the experience of the “foot in mouth” problem! However, in the presence of the bereaved, the pain can be much more pronounced than at any other time. In almost every GriefShare meeting I've been in, there are reports of awful things said to people who were grieving a loss. The aforementioned “God needed an angel” is spoken so often some people probably believe it. Often Romans 8:28 is quoted as if to say that this may look bad, but it's really good. The dreadful (though well-meaning) statement that “this is just all part of God's plan and we can't see the whole story” is clearly unhelpful as well. Filkins lists some other statements that appear trite to the mourning:

“God must have wanted her more than you do...”

“They're in a better place...”

“He is not hurting any more...”

“I understand how you feel...though he wasn't a child, my dog

Sinbad was very special to me...”

“You can just try again and have another baby...”

“That child must have not been right for you so God will send you a better one...”

“Your child died, but it could have been worse; it could have been two children – so cheer up!”

“God will not put more on us than we can bear.”

“I know you must be hurting this Christmas season, but isn’t it a great comfort knowing that Fred is spending his first Christmas with the Lord.” (Filkins, pp. 62-64)

This is the wrong time for lengthy Bible readings, sermonettes with happy platitudes, or even sharing something that has helped you. Even if you have been in exactly the same situation – it doesn’t appear the same to the bereaved. After all, you are not them. Your loss was not their loss. Wait for others to initiate spiritual discussions that are important to them.

If there is anything we can learn from the multitude of writings about grief it is that there are no words. Occasionally someone will say to me, “I don’t know what to say.” I do appreciate that truthful and earnest statement. Actually, it is one that resonates with me. You see, I do not know what to say either. One author reminds us that “The grieving do not expect you to have the answers to unanswerable questions.” (Filkins, p. 25)

So it is best if we say nothing. I’m sure there are many things I will never recall about the day John Robert died. But I do remember one friend who sat by me in silence. Every once in a while he would squeeze my shoulder and pat my back. But he just sat there. Quietly. That was a good friend.

~Be Truthful~

I really believe that a time of bereavement is a time to be honest and truthful. We hope that those who are grieving will feel free to open up and express themselves. They can only do that in the context of an honest relationship. “Don’t bounce into the room with false cheerfulness, but admit your helplessness and concern. ‘I would like to help you, but I don’t know how’. (Graham p. 116)

~Be Prayerful~

We must be aware that those who are staggering from a loss may not be very open to lofty directives about God. At that moment many are feeling some anger at God for not diverting the loss in some miraculous way. Still, it is a good time to be prayerful. If you sense the bereaved is not open to having prayer with you, you can still pray for them on your own.

~Be Faithful~

Honestly, this is a difficult time to be someone’s friend. They are unable to reciprocate in any real way. The leaning that they may do upon your shoulders can be overwhelming. Unfortunately it is during this time of difficulty that many people abandon their friends out of frustration of not knowing what to do or say. One day your hurting friend will become aware that the casseroles have stopped arriving, the mailbox is empty, and no one asks how they are doing any longer. It is at this moment that they really need you to be the true friend they have come to expect. Conversely, this is the time when it is most difficult to demonstrate friendship.

Continue your support over the long haul. Stay in touch with the grieving person, periodically checking in, dropping by, or sending letters or cards. Your support is more valuable than ever once the funeral is over, the other mourners are gone, and the initial shock of the loss has worn off. (helpguide)

~Be Aware~

Appearances. Don't make assumptions based on outward appearances. The bereaved person may look fine on the outside, while inside he or she is suffering. (helpguide)

Special Days. Offer extra support on special days. Certain times and days of the year will be particularly hard for your grieving friend or family member. Holidays, family milestones, birthdays, and anniversaries often reawaken grief. Be sensitive on these occasions. Let the bereaved person know that you're there for whatever he or she needs. (helpguide)

Deepening Depression. Watch for warning signs that your friend's condition is worsening over time. The kinds of warning signs to watch for include:

- Difficulty functioning in daily life
- Extreme focus on the death
- Excessive bitterness, anger, or guilt
- Neglecting personal hygiene
- Alcohol or drug abuse
- Withdrawing from others
- Constant feelings of hopelessness
- Talking about dying or suicide

It can be tricky to bring up your concerns to the bereaved person. State your own feelings: “I am troubled by the fact that you aren’t sleeping – perhaps you should look into getting help.”

Looking Forward

I have no doubt that we will learn more as we experience losses, along with our friends and loved ones. We all want to be used by God to be a blessing in the life of a hurting friend. Let’s keep in mind these various ways and seek God’s help in wisdom as we love the tender and broken hearts that try to find new life after someone they love has died.

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