

## Ministry of Presence: Being There for Grieving People

Here are 10 ways to be there for someone grieving:

1. **SHOW UP.** Recognize that you don't know what to say, and that's okay. You don't need to have the "right thing" to say. Your presence matters more than your words. Often what SOUNDS helpful to you is often received as something dumb and offensive by the person you are trying to help. Button your lip and open your arms.

And if something more concrete would help, here are some unhelpful things people routinely say out of a desire to help:

"God needed him/her more than we did."

"She's an angel now."

"Just pray, everything will be okay."

"Just rely on your faith to get through this."

"You know, what you need to do is..."

"This is all part of God's mysterious will."

People usually say those sorts of things because THEY feel uncomfortable and don't know what to say. So they blurt out what sounds helpful as a declarative statement and walk away. **Be okay with silence and you'll be a huge source of comfort to them.**

When Jesus's friend Lazarus died, his response was to weep (John 11:35). Best practice: "Weep with those who weep." (Romans 12:15)

\*\*By the way, if you realize you've said one of those things, don't kick yourself, realize there's a more helpful way that you now know.

2. **CLOSE TALKING.** Rule of thumb about saying anything: The closer you are, the more words you can say. It's enough to say "I'm so sorry for your loss, I'm praying for you, and I'm here for you." If you're CLOSE, ASK "How are you doing? What do you need?" Then LISTEN.

3. **TANGIBLE IS BETTER.** DON'T say "Let me know if you need anything. I mean that." (Even if you really do mean that.) The person is grieving, and the last thing they'll do is generically respond to your generic offer. Instead, make tangible offers ("Is it okay if I bring dinner over tomorrow night?" "Would it be okay if I came and got your laundry and did it tomorrow?" "Do you want to go to a movie with me/your kids/\_\_\_\_\_? My treat.") Anticipate their needs and seek to meet them.

4. **THE FIRST WEEK.** The first week is a trauma scene. Dealing with the funeral arrangements, contacting family, experiencing wave after wave of grief. It's traumatic. Just know that. Your presence matters most the first week.

5. **BACK TO NORMAL, SORT OF.** The second week it hits. The funeral is over, all the family leaves, life for everyone else "goes back to normal" and they are left trying to even figure out if normal will ever happen again. This is when #3 above matters.

6. **THE FIRST YEAR.** The first year is the hardest. The first Thanksgiving, Christmas, Mother's Day, etc. all happen for the first time...without them. Understand that and let them grieve. Suggestion: set reminders on your phone for the major anniversaries over the course of that first year. Follow up with a text, card, call, small gift, etc.

7. **IT'S THEIR GRIEF.** There is no manual for grief. In other words, there isn't a "right" way to grieve. Anger, sadness, depression, long-stares into the distance, laughter--they are all part of the process. Be careful not to put your expectations of how you think it ought to go on them. Respect their process.

8. **TURN OFF AUTO-CORRECT.** Don't correct someone's theology when they are grieving. "That's not the right way to think about that" or "The Bible says that..." are super-unhelpful and insensitive. I've heard one pastor say, "You get to pick your own theology when you go through grief." Job's friends were at their best when they simply sat with Job. It all went downhill when they began trying to correct Job's theology.

LATER (usually much later), if you are their friend, you can talk about what it all means and help them sort through what might be unhelpful ways of thinking about God and death.

9. **TIME IS RELATIVE.** As they progress past the shock into the first year, don't put your timetable onto them. "Well, they should be past that by now." You aren't them. Don't "should" on them like that. Instead, be there for them.

10. **SHOW UP.** You may have heard the expression, "The world is run by those who show up." In regards to ministry with the grieving, I would change it to say, "Ministry is done by those who show up." Compassion isn't done at a distance. Love them. Love shows up. Period.