

Practical Help

There are also many practical things you can do to help, regardless of the type of loss. I hope you will begin to recognize and respond to the different types of losses people experience, some of which don't get much social recognition or support. Any major loss cuts deep, whether it is a divorce, personal rejection, job, or death.

With each loss you will need to (1) discover your friend's personal situation and needs; (2) decide what you're willing and able to do for her, realizing that you can neither do it all, nor should you; and (3) contact her and offer to do the most difficult of the jobs you've chosen. If your friend rejects your offer, suggest another. Specific tasks could include feeding pets, making and delivering meals, doing yard work, making difficult phone calls, obtaining needed information regarding support groups or new employment, providing transportation, being available to run errands, and so forth. At some point in time giving her a sensitive, supportive book on loss and grief could be helpful.

If the loss affected one person, minister to that person. But if it affected the family unit, there needs to be a reaching out to each family member (adults and children). Be sensitive to all members of the family. I've heard many husbands say, "I'm so tired of people asking me how my wife is doing. For once I wish they'd ask how I'm doing." Discover which of their social involvements will be the most difficult for them and be available for support.

As the years go by, friends and relatives lose loved ones. Prior to Christmas, go through your card list to make sure you've made the needed changes so the name on the card doesn't upset the recipient. For a widow, receiving cards addressed to "Mr. and Mrs." may be painful.

Do's and Don'ts

What not to do:

Don't minimize your friend's pain with comments like, "It's probably for the best," "Things could be worse," "You'll remarry," "You're young, you can always have another one," "You're strong, you'll get over it soon," or "You know God is in control." Comments like these might be attempts to offer hope, but to a hurting person they sound as though you don't comprehend the enormity of what's happened. They don't acknowledge the person's pain or loss.

What's best to do:

You can offer simple, understanding statements, such as, "I feel for you during this difficult time," "This must be very hard for you," "I share your feelings of loss," and "I wish I could take the hurt away." Comments like these let the person know you acknowledge her pain and that it's okay to feel that way.

What not to do:

Don't say, "I'm so sorry" as the end of your sentiment. Your hurting friend is probably sorry too, but he can't respond to that kind of comment.

What's best to do:

Say, "I'm so sorry" and add, "I know how special he was to you," "I'll miss her also," "I want to help you and I'm available any time you need me," or "I've been praying for you. Is there something specific I should be praying for?" That gives the grieving person something specific and more satisfying to respond to.

What not to do:

Don't say, "Is there anything I can do to help?"

What's best to do:

Be aggressive with your willingness to help. Ask yourself, "What would I need if I were in a similar situation?" And then offer to do some of those things. You can also be specific. "I'm on my way to the store. What can I pick up for you?" "Would tomorrow be a good day to help you with the laundry?" "Would your children like to come over and play with my kids this afternoon?" Most of the time, a person in a crisis can't decide what she needs, so offering specifics helps. Besides, she probably doesn't want to impose so might be hesitant to bring up anything.

What not to do:

Don't say, "You shouldn't feel that way."

What's best to do:

Encourage your friend to keep a journal or write down her thoughts and feelings. Often just seeing her thoughts on paper will help her deal with what she's facing.

What not to do:

Don't try to answer her questions of "Why"—"Why him?" "Why me?" "Why now?" "Why, God?" You don't have any answers at this time, and the true answer may not be apparent. Remember Job in the Bible? His friends didn't help when they visited. He told them, "You are miserable comforters, all of you!" (Job 16:2).

What's best to do:

Simply respond to why questions this way: "I don't know why. I guess both of us would like to have some answers right now, especially you. I wish I had answers to give you."

What not to do:

Don't offer spiritual advice regarding why she's facing this problem or tell her that she'll be a stronger person after going through this. We don't really know why tragedies happen or why some people have to go through so much trauma.

What's best to do:

Agree when she expresses her feelings. When she says, "It's not fair!" Confirm what she's feeling. Say, "Yes, what happened to you doesn't seem fair, and it doesn't make much sense." Do this whether or not you share the same perspective.

What not to do:

Don't put timetables on your hurting friend's recovery. Don't decide when she'll be ready for certain activities or emotions. When she doesn't fit into the timetable you've set, she may feel she isn't coping well or should be her old self by now. That only hinders real progress. Everyone is different and recovery times vary—sometimes greatly.

What's best to do:

Allow your friend all the time she needs to deal effectively with the phases of her grief process.

What not to do:

Don't quote Bible verses as a way to correct, minimize, or put your friend's feelings in a certain perspective. Saying "God will give you the strength" may seem impossible to her right now. Also, think very carefully before offering a passage. Make sure it can't be interpreted negatively. Grieving people tend to see the negative sides first. When you do offer encouragement, make sure it's heartfelt with the goal of comforting your friend.

What's best to do:

Give spiritual encouragement from your heart. Include Bible verses that have comforted you at a difficult time, and let her know that. Also tell her you are praying for her daily. And when you pray with her, keep it brief and reflect her feelings in the prayer. Focus on how much God understands her pain and the fact that He wants to be her source of amazing comfort.

What not to do:

Don't say "I understand" when you haven't faced the same situation. Also, telling someone that everything will be all right when you've never known the depth of her hardship is an empty statement. And you don't have any idea how this specific situation will turn out. And don't share horror stories of people you know who have been through something similar. She won't find that encouraging or hopeful.

What's best to do:

Be honest about your experiences. If you haven't endured her particular kind of tragedy, say that: "I haven't been through what you're facing, but I want you to know I care about you and will support you through the difficult times ahead." If you've had a similar crisis, tell her about it briefly, adding that you can empathize with her. Realize that, of course, you can't completely understand what she's experiencing because you haven't been through what she has in the past that laid the foundation for her reaction.

What not to do:

Don't ignore her needs after the immediate loss and hubbub has subsided. She still needs ongoing comfort.

What's best to do:

Keep in touch for months, especially at the critical times discussed in this book, such as anniversaries. Let her know you're still praying for her. Ask how she's really doing and listen carefully. Send thoughtful notes with encouraging words.

What not to do:

Don't expect unrealistic optimism or levity from your hurting friend. What's best to do: Realize that her heart is full of pain and turmoil. Let her know that you are here to listen to her feelings and that you want to be part of the healing of that pain.

What not to do:

Don't offer clichés or be unrealistically optimistic. Realize that those tendencies usually cover up your own insecurities and emotions. Dare to be real.

What's best to do:

Indicate your love and support by saying, "I really feel awkward because I'm not sure what to say, what you need, or how to help you. But I do want you to know that I love you. I'm praying for you. And I'm available for anything you need help with."

What not to do:

Don't use "should" or "if only" such as: "You should give the clothes away." "You should go back to work and get over this." "You should have more faith." "If only you had watched him more carefully." "If only you hadn't been so strict." "If only you ate better."

What's best to do:

Allow hurting people to make the decisions and take the necessary steps to deal with the trauma. No one can tell another how they should feel.

What not to do:

Don't offer unasked-for advice. If your suggestions weren't solicited they may not be appreciated.

What's best to do:

Respond cautiously and prayerfully with uplifting and edifying ideas when your friend asks for your help. Let her know that you pray for her daily. On occasion, ask how she would like you to be praying for her

What not to do:

Be careful in saying statements like "This must be God's will."

What's best to do:

Let your friend know that God is present with her in this time of suffering even if she doesn't sense Him. Gently remind her that He is the Comforter and Protector in the midst of pain and tragedy. Be sensitive regarding how and when you share this so it won't come across as a cliché

or platitude. As you walk through your own losses, you'll be better able to help others walk through their valleys of loss and pain. The walk can seem so lonely, but when people come alongside, just being there to listen, to weep, and to offer comfort, grievors are encouraged and sustained.

None of us walks alone. Jesus Christ experienced loss and pain, and He is with us all the time to sustain, encourage, and support us. Yes, life is full of losses, but He makes it possible to survive them, grow from them, conquer them, and move forward again.

Wright, H. Norman. *What to Say When You Don't Know What to Say: In Times of Grief, Heartache, and Crisis* (pp. 186-192). Harvest House Publishers. Kindle Edition.