

5 Ways to Comfort Someone Who is Grieving

Hello all! I am Susan B. Mead, an author, speaker, chaplain and mom. I authored the book, [Dance with Jesus: From Grief to Grace](#). Prior to that, I spent 22+ years in corporate America with Johnson & Johnson until I decided to retire 10-years early because I realized things get broken, discarded and replaced in life, but people matter...and I wanted to spend time with those who matter most. Why?

- In 2004, I lost Bette, my younger sister and a brilliant PhD nurse, to suicide.
- In 2008, I lost Kyle, my 20 year old college-aged son to drugs and alcohol on the last night of spring break.
- In 2013, I was in the grandstands cheering on Amby Burfoot, my cousin, as he ran the 45th anniversary of winning the Boston Marathon, only to see the first bomb explode directly across the street.

Having experienced my share of grief, I learned God shines the brightest light in the darkest moments and shows up when we need him most. I simply want to share my journey to inspire, empower and equip others...You too can find grace in the midst of grief.

Remember That Your Words Matter

The first thing I learned when training as a Chaplain was that the most gracious words you can share when a friend is dealing with loss are “I can’t imagine...”

I can’t imagine dignifies their loss, their pain and their feelings. It also shows how much you care about your words and their dignity. Give your precious friend the grace you would want should you find yourself in their situation.

How do you give grace? Following the words I can’t imagine, here is the key point. Please do not be tempted to define their grief with your words. Insert no words such as pain, anger, devastation, hopelessness, helplessness, etc. Any word inserted is how you would feel and may or may not address their feelings. So let a heartfelt “I can’t imagine” be sufficient, heartfelt and compassionate.

I care. You matter to me. I’m here to listen. You are in my prayers.

Yes, your words matter, so please choose them wisely. Your intention is to comfort your friend rather than wound them with your words, so pause a moment and consider carefully how you would feel hearing the words you are about to say.

Please be mindful and skip platitudes or words that minimize your friend’s loss and their feelings. Examples follow—God needed a new angel. They are better off. Have you heard about this person’s loss? Or I know exactly how you feel (please do not follow these words with a tirade about you or someone else).

Your words can offer your friend such comfort and peace. They will thank you for fewer words with deeper meaning!

Should your friend be dealing with a loss of a family member or friend due to suicide or drug/alcohol interaction or overdose, remember to not minimize the person or the loss of that person. God's greater plan may take a long time to unfold, so please withhold any words that may be misinterpreted as judgmental on your part. We learn that we don't always know God's plan even when it seems so evident.

Here's just a couple of examples I heard following my sister's suicide:
I'm so sorry she committed the unpardonable sin. I'm so sorry she's gone to hell.

Or this comment I heard at a friend's son's funeral:
Well, he was just a "druggie" anyway, so no big loss.

Can you imagine adding the burden of hearing those (or similar) words to your loss or your friend's loss? None of us would intentionally speak so callously.

Remember that your actions matter

Consider what you would want your friends to do for you and do that! There will be a houseful of people who come to comfort their friend and family member, creating some different needs during the time immediately surrounding the loss.

The most obvious action is to visit your friend who is experiencing a loss. Hug them. Take them food, whether a casserole, a pre-sliced ham, turkey breast or grab and go food, like a tray of sandwiches, veggies, fruit.

One precious friend brought a huge bundle of necessities. Yes, paper goods, i.e., toilet paper, paper towels, napkins, paper plates, plastic utensils, disposable cups, and cases of water! Can I share that this was the best delivery I received, as I was not stocked for masses of caring visitors? I welcomed each person and I most certainly welcomed "the necessities" when they were delivered. This gift allowed me to spend time with the friends who were caring for me versus having to become the caregiver in my time of need.

Reach out to your friend with a phone call to let them know you care. Do not expect a return call if your message goes to voice mail. Be brief. Why do I say this? There are so many folks who show up to help during a loss, that your friend may have visitors and does not want to be rude to you or to them. So consider what may be going on around them without questioning them. I was not able to think clearly, so if asked, I am not sure the best answers were provided. Your friend may also experience a change in their ability to process questions during their time of loss.

Has God put an idea in your head or on your heart regarding your friend? Follow that nudge! Simply take your friend what's on your heart – it will be exactly right. Please remember to not ask what they need, as they just lost what they need most – that person.

You may prefer to send a memorial, a plant, a tree or other pass-along plant in memory of their loved one. Have you ever considered planning a tree and sending a photo along with a card to

show the newly planted tree if you are in their hometown and they are now from away, especially if you know that they would appreciate that gesture?

After I lost Kyle, my best friend told me that every time I saw a butterfly, I would hear Kyle say, “Love you momma,” and dragonflies, he would say, “Hey, hey momma!” because Kyle was such a cut up. Now when I see a butterfly, I hear God whisper, “Love you” or when I see a dragonfly, that God whisper is a chuckle, “Hey darlin.” You may “give” a similar gift to your sweet friend that becomes a cherished recollection too.

Is there a special thing associated with their loved one? Find a card with that image on it, i.e., heart, butterflies, dragonflies, cardinals, their favorite sports emblem or team, whatever, to send to them with a note about what you recall about that thing being special to them. Your note will be among their treasures!

Please remember to include your first and last name, return address, phone and email on the card itself. Envelopes can and do get separated. Invariably, that occurs when they will need your contact information to send you a thank you note.

It may be thoughtful for you to send a gift card or to even have pizza or another type of meal delivered a couple of weeks or months after their loss by a restaurant in their area (FIRST confirm they will be home & include the tip for the delivery person when you pay.) Food tends to be gone a few weeks after the loss as do the friends who were so very present immediately following their loss.

Do you cherish your family photographs? Yes? So do people who have experienced loss. They will not be able to take any new photos! Do send ANY photos you have of their loved one.

If the pictures are digital, put the photos on a jump drive and mail to them. Or email them a shared folder with photos of their loved one in subject line. I received so many emails, many were lost in the deluge. The jump drive allowed me get to it when I was able versus losing the most important gift a friend could give me – memories of my loved one. This was the most cherished gift I received as new photographs are no longer an option. Should you find pictures later as you go through photographs, SEND them then! What an amazing gift of remembrance it would be to be given that gift sometime later!

Grief seems to “whack” attention span for many people. If you feel compelled to send a book, consider sending a short, easy to read book, not a heavy tome (sounds like tomb) or a huge saga (sounds like a sob). Your desire is to provide your friend with words that have meaning and that matter right now. So right now, their reading preferences may have changed from what they normally read. Some avid readers find themselves experiencing challenges sitting still or focusing on words on a page as they grieve the loss of a dear one.

Don't be afraid to speak the name of their loved one

Like honey, their loved one's name is sweet to their soul. Hearing their loved one's name is also like a cup of hot tea. It comforts. It also honors and pays tribute to their lost dear one. Please

know that it will not “make them sad” to hear the name of someone they love(d) as love never ends. It lives on in memories. So speak up!

Help them remember their loved one

Don't you love it when we have memories that make us feel great? Memories help us recall the love of the moment and of the person. Put reminders on your calendar with advance notice to reach out in remembrance at key times. You may want to consider some significant dates, such as:

1st anniversary of their loss – send a card, a photo, a video, or something that honors their loss. They will cherish you.

Loved one's birthday – such thoughtfulness is uncommon. Be that uncommon friend who cares deeply and is thoughtful beyond measure.

When you think of them – simply let your friend know you care, whether it's a phone call, a text, a social media message, a handwritten card or even a visit.

Use your natural gifts

Caring shows in all you do and say. It is so wonderful when we are able to use our natural gifts to bless someone, so think about something you like to do and simply do it for your friend.

Is praying one of your strengths? Pray for your friend. You may want to write them a note including your prayer so they see just how deeply you care about their emotional and spiritual wellbeing.

Do you like to cook? Stepping into the kitchen may well be the first thing you want to do. Do it!

Do you have pictures, video or even old film of their loved one? You may want to make a scrapbook, or load a digital photo frame with those sweet reminders of their precious loved one. Should you have old photos or film, consider taking them to a service to have them digitized. Can you imagine what a treasure that would be?!

Are you a storyteller? Tell a story about their sweet, sweet loved one. Whether you video it (with your cell phone-so simple!), record yourself telling the story (again, cell phones are pretty amazing technology) or simply writing your story about some cherished or fun or funny moment about their loved one will light up the moment they see, hear or read the story. Share your story!

Do you like to use your hands to make things neat? Offer to clean their house, mow the lawn, etc. Can you imagine how appreciated that may be?

Are you naturally gifted at organizing things? Offer to help coordinate a meal for the family and friends before or after the service so people have a place to gather.

Or you may simply offer to drive folks to and from the funeral home and cemetery. Why do I say that? I got left at the funeral home following the viewing...Laughable now, yet people were headed to my house to gather for fellowship and food! People who are mourning are so easily distracted that the normal process of going through the mental "checklist" to make sure everyone and everything is in it's place may be compromised.

Remember, things get broken, discarded or replaced, yet people matter. Let your friend know that they matter...to you. Give your friend the best gift of all ~ the gift of your time.