

Grief and Comfort



"Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted." - Matthew 5:4

The bodies lie under a sheet. Blood soaks through in different spots. Life has ended prematurely. What about the families who continue to live on?

You feel their pain as an onlooker, not as a family member.

If you are a friend of the family you can almost feel the grief physically. Almost.

Sometimes it's difficult to fight back the tears. But you must because the living need your help.

Many describe the grief as indescribable. Those who can express words say it feels like:

"a stomach ache that never goes away."

"a nightmare from which I never awake."

Dreams for the future are impossible. Helplessness, denial, anger, confusion - endless reminders because they see their dead or dying children.

Then an unendurable sense of irretrievable loss and guilt. All felt at the same time.

You want help. But what can you say?

What would be the best expression of love, compassion and sympathy?

All of a sudden you realize that you are stuck.

There is no book with a set of rules to follow; no handbook for showing mercy; no book with lists of "right" or "appropriate" things to say.

Even as you comb through your Bible you won't find a chapter on how to sympathize.

No. Comfort for the sorrowing cannot be regulated or systematized.

If you go through programmed motions with a grieving family you become a good candidate to be another "Job's counselor" - none of us wants to be that.

You might be a Christian with a firm hope in the life hereafter, but you are also human.

Don't hide that.

It's your loving humanity that will provide the most comfort.

What can you do? What should you do...or not do?

What can be said that might be appreciated or appropriate?

Some will say something because they feel something must be said.

Resist this urge no matter how well-meaning.

Most of what you desire to say or do stems from your heart of love.

But not all of those things are effective in helping.

Many times a person simply needs a shoulder to lean on, not a theological reminder of future hope.

A quiet expression of love is often far more healing than any words motivated by the same love.

Be like Jesus.

Be quiet. Be real. Be supportive. Be available.

Jesus was quiet more often than we notice.

He allowed people to express their grief. It was His presence, not His words, that carried the most impact.

Chaplains call this the Ministry of Presence."

These were Jesus' methods.

He was always real. He expressed His heartfelt feelings honestly. He felt compassion for those who were suffering. He wept.

If you suddenly feel tears coming, cry.

If you are overwhelmed with compassion, admit it - even if silently.

But *do not make a show of your feelings*.

Jesus was supportive.

Those who provide comfort must have tender hearts of understanding.

They do not quote verses from the Bible or use stacks of literature.

They come simply to show - and *maybe say...maybe* - that they care.

They do not emphasize future hope in an attempt to erase the grief of those who sorrow in the present. They are committed to understanding that the grieving need to grieve.

Few things heal wounded spirits better than the balm of a supportive hug.

"Weep with them who weep" - Romans 12:15

Jesus is always available.

"The LORD is near to those who have a broken heart" - Psalm 34:18

We are human and cannot be everywhere at all times. We also have lives which must be lived.

We have responsibilities that cannot be dropped for long periods of time.

But we can think.

Everybody comes around the first few days after someone dies. Some remain persistent for a few weeks. But what happens after a month? What happens 5 months later? What happens after the flowers die?

When everyone else's life gets back to normal, the life of the family of the deceased is never the same. Their's is a new normal.

That empty chair remains at the kitchen table. When the other kids are going to the pool, baking cookies or riding bikes, the dead sibling's absence leaves a big gap.

The average is 6 weeks. After 6 weeks the family of the deceased is typically left alone.
Be committed to comforting later on as well as in the moment.
Think. Care. Be available.

People don't know what to do or say. No one really does.

There is still a birthday to celebrate for the deceased loved one.
Yet that person now has a new date attached to their memory...the anniversary of their death.

The family still remembers the birthday. That person was born. They existed.
They are an unerasable part of that family. Forever.

The family does not forget that their loved one has died. They still speak of that person by name.
So should you.

When Lazarus died his sisters grieved.
Jesus was real - He wept.
Jesus was quiet - He took their angry rebukes for not having arrived before their brother died.
Jesus was supportive - He was deeply moved.
Jesus was available - He stayed by their side.

No big sermons. No verses of comfort. No leaflets. No attempts to correct their misunderstandings. Not even a frown that suggested disapproval.

He let their grief run its course. Jesus knew - and we should also - that grief cannot be walked around. It must be walked through.

We are only healed of grief when we express it to its fullest.

"To every thing there is a season, and a time to every purpose under the heaven...a time to mourn..."
- Ecclesiastes 3:1, 4

Maybe this explains why so many are grieving and so few are comforting.

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