

Question: How do you know what to do or say when a friend is grieving over the death of a dear loved one? What would Jesus do?

The death of a loved one must be faced by all of us at sometime. The depth of the grief depends on factors like the closeness and length of the relationship, age of the person who died, and circumstances of the death, whether or not after a long illness or as a result of a sudden tragedy. While I cannot give a precise formula for every situation, I do believe we can glean some broad principles from the Bible that Jesus would encourage us to apply.

Begin by approaching a friend in bereavement with respectful silence. When Job's friends heard about the tragic loss of his children, property and health, they came to him and sat with him in silence for seven days. When they did speak, their words which were intended to help only made his suffering worse (Job 2:11ff). Silence seems awkward; we feel that we are doing nothing and something must be done. But the greatest need at this moment is not for our words but our presence showing that we care and want to surround our friend with love. We need to learn from Job's experience and from the words of Proverbs 29:20, "Do you see a man who speaks in haste? There is more hope for a fool than for him." There will come a time when it is appropriate to say something, but don't rush it. Even then, it may be best to simply say, "I'm here because I care. I don't know what to say." Your presence alone means more than you can ever know.

Along with silence, approach a grieving friend with a willingness to listen. A person dealing with grief often has a greater need to be heard than to hear. This can be uncomfortable for the one wishing to offer help. But for healing and recovery to take place, those dealing with grief need to be allowed to express openly their sorrow and pain. Sometimes they are having to deal with guilt feelings or even anger at what has happened. The words of James 1:19 have a special place in this situation, "Everyone should be quick to listen and slow to speak." Don't force grieving friends to talk; but when they show a desire to talk, allow them to do so. Learn to be a good listener at this difficult time.

When the time does come to speak, use words of sympathy and love. Do not feel compelled to express your opinions, offer simplistic, pious platitudes or explain what has happened. Discussions of theology or interpretations of the problem of pain and death need to be left to less emotional times. The wise man warned, “A fool finds no pleasure in understanding but delights in airing his own opinions” (Proverbs 18:2). On the other hand, the apostle Paul wrote that we should “carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2). A few verses earlier he had explained that the “entire law is summed up in a single command: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself’” (Galatians 5:14). Our words to those in bereavement need to be expressions of love, concern and of a willingness to stay with them and do whatever may need to be done.

Above all, nothing can replace prayer in times of sorrow and tragedy. Before going to see a friend struggling with grief, pray for the wisdom and guidance of the “Father of compassion and the God of all comfort” to be with you and your friend (2 Corinthians 1:3).

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