

HOW TO HELP YOUR GRIEVING FRIEND

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THANK YOU...
A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

Thank you for your loving desire to understand and learn how to better care for your grieving friend.

The contents of this booklet were written seven months after the death of my daughter. They were born from a realization: we were surrounded by people who genuinely wanted to help but were often crippled by uncertainty or the fear of saying "the wrong thing."

These pages contain practical information and suggestions intended to equip you to prayerfully serve your friend as God uniquely leads you.

We were so profoundly blessed by those who faithfully sat and walked alongside us. I will forever be grateful for the love they demonstrated simply by staying present in our grief. I am confident that your friend will be just as deeply moved by your faithful, Spirit-led companionship.

As you read, please know that I am cheering you on. You are answering a sacred call to walk alongside the brokenhearted.

BEFORE YOU HELP

PRAYERFULLY CHECK YOUR MOTIVES

If you desire to move into the life of a grieving person in a way that goes beyond practical physical needs, take a moment to prayerfully check your motives.

Go to the Lord and ask Him to help you examine your heart. It is important to ensure you are coming alongside your friend for the right reasons. We can easily—and unintentionally—be misguided by the good feeling of being helpful.

Avoid the “Rescuer” Trap: It is a mistake to believe we can effectively guide, rescue, or save a grieving person. We must ensure we are driven by selfless love, rather than a subconscious desire to be the hero of their story.

A Vital Reminder: There is only one Savior who can provide the healing your friend desperately needs in their grief: Jesus Christ. If you approach your friend believing you are equipped or called to “fix” or rescue them, you will likely do more unintentional harm than good. Our role in the lives of hurting people is simply to be their

companion—gently listening and pointing them toward the only One who can truly understand and meet their every need.

EMBRACE THE MINISTRIES OF PRAYER AND PRESENCE

Understand that, in addition to meeting practical physical needs, the most impactful ways you can serve your grieving friend are through the ministries of **prayer** and **presence**.

Prayer is powerful. Never underestimate the impact of taking time to pray for God to comfort, strengthen, and sustain your friend. Pray fervently, knowing that “the prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective” (James 5:16).

The ministry of presence, simply put, is attentively listening and being fully present—both physically and emotionally. It is a deeply meaningful service. Job’s friends demonstrated this beautifully as they sat in the dust, weeping with him in silence for seven days. Their tragic mistake was abandoning that selfless ministry of presence for self-righteous attempts to explain his circumstances and direct his path. As the book of Job poignantly demonstrates, providing ultimate wisdom and direction in the midst of tragedy is God’s role alone, not ours.

PRACTICAL TIPS FOR BEING PRESENT

- **Weep with those who weep.** Whether shared in person with tearful hugs or through cards and messages, shared heartache is a precious gift. Nothing ministers to a hurting heart quite like knowing another is aching with you.
(Romans 12:15)
- **Be quick to listen.** Listen intently and be faithful to pray for whatever wounds or needs are shared or observed.
(James 1:19)

- **Be very slow to speak words other than those of love and compassion.** Be extremely cautious about offering unsolicited counsel or bombarding them with scripture, articles, and literature addressing what you perceive their need to be. Unless you feel reasonably confident the Lord is prompting the sharing—and the timing of the sharing—*choose instead to simply weep.* (Proverbs 25:11)
- **Avoid attempting to relate dissimilar grief experiences.** You may feel that sharing your own loss will help by demonstrating that you understand their pain and are thus equipped to counsel them. However, unless your experience is very similar, you likely do not know and cannot relate. For example: Even though I have walked through the pain of losing a grandmother, a dear friend, and a miscarriage, those experiences didn't teach me how to navigate the grief of losing my seventeen-year-old child. Each loss is unique and doesn't necessarily equip us to fully understand or guide someone through their unique loss.
- **Avoid non-death-related parallels.** Attempting to relate by sharing the loss of a possession, a pet, a job, or a home is unintentionally hurtful. It risks devaluing the life of their loved one. Most grieving people would gladly endure any of those circumstantial losses to have their loved one back.
- **Be diligent in prayer.** Ask God for discernment and wisdom as you interact. He is faithful and will guide you if you prayerfully seek and surrender to His leading.

GRIEF IS NOT A MEDICAL PROCESS

Grief is not a medical process to be resolved. It is not a series of steps to work through, a list of boxes to check, or a process with a right and wrong way to finish. Grief is the agony we experience in the painful process of learning to live in the absence of a precious loved one.

Grief hurts. It can be raw and messy, but grieving is not bad or wrong. It is not a disorder to be cured, and it is not a list of stages to be completed. It is simply deep sorrow in response to deep loss. It is a reflection of love for the missing person; as long as love endures, grief will persist in varying forms.

- **Pray for your grieving friends.** Not merely a quick "Lord, comfort them," but a genuine, deep wrestling in prayer on their behalf. Pray Scripture over them; the Psalms are a treasure trove for this. (Psalms 6, 22, 28, 56, 57, 71, 77, 142)
- **Understand that there are no standards or timelines for grieving.** Remind yourself of this constantly. Pray for

patience and strength to persevere and walk well with your friend for the long haul.

- **Don't sanitize their grief.**¹ Grief is sanitized when it is viewed as a medical process to be "completed" rather than the reality of the deep pain and loss they are suffering in the absence of their loved one.
- **Accept that they may always grieve.** Their grief may change form or appearance, but depending upon the relationship, they may always grieve. With near certainty, parents who have endured the death of a child will always grieve. The waves of anguish will vary in frequency, intensity, and duration, but they will continue to come until they are reunited with their loved one.

1. <https://listeningtohim.com/2017/11/03/the-sanitizing-of-grief/>

GRIEF IS EMOTIONALLY AND MENTALLY EXHAUSTING

Grief is emotionally and mentally exhausting. The magnitude of the emotional and mental anguish of deep grief is incomprehensible to those who have not experienced it. Trying to accept and process the reality of the unthinkable is all-consuming. All of the grieving person's mental and emotional resources are involuntarily occupied with processing the death of their loved one.

For parents with children still at home, the intense emotional and mental demands are compounded as they must also strive to ensure the well-being of their remaining children. Even after the initial shock has passed, the emotional self-control required to push through the heartache of grief to accomplish activities of daily living is staggering. This is particularly true when those activities require interacting superficially in public or group settings. Normal events that previously required little emotional energy—like church attendance—can be completely exhausting in the midst of deep grief.

- **Pray for your grieving friends.** Ask God to strengthen them and to lavishly grant them His grace and mercy to enable them to persevere emotionally and mentally. Ask

them for specific needs, and then purposefully bathe those needs in prayer. Follow up with them for updates when appropriate.

- **Be available, but allow space.** Offer to be present in a way that they can decline without fearing they will hurt your feelings. Short text messages are often a better option than phone calls, which can be stressful. *Consider texting first* to express your availability to talk if they would like. Similarly, ask if it is a good time to visit rather than showing up at their home unannounced.
- **Be cautious about adding extra responsibilities.** Prayerfully consider before adding responsibilities to your friend's "to-do list" or sharing non-urgent problems for them to solve. If possible, offer to lighten their load instead. I vividly remember being handed a long list of names and addresses for thank-you notes after our daughter's funeral service. A friend saw the distress in my eyes and immediately offered to take the list and handle them for me. Eight years later, I am still grateful for the relief she provided that day.

GRIEF IS SPIRITUALLY EXHAUSTING

Grief is spiritually exhausting. Spiritual warfare, particularly when one is deeply wounded, is utterly depleting. Our adversary—who lives to steal, kill, and destroy—fixes his focus and intensifies his attacks on those who are hurting. Yet, in the midst of this warfare, we can take comfort in knowing that the Lord is close to the broken-hearted; He will neither abandon nor forsake them. Even in their deepest grief, He is actively and faithfully ministering to, teaching, and instructing them in His time and His way. (1 Peter 5:8; Psalm 34:18; Deuteronomy 31:6)

- **Pray for your grieving friends.** Pray that they will be able to fix their focus on Christ and that their ears will be attentive to His voice. Pray that He will speak to them through His Word, and that the truth they glean will echo in their minds and hearts as an anchor for their souls. (Hebrews 6:17-20)
- **Don't assume you know what they need spiritually.** Remember the lesson and rebuke of Job's friends. Be

extremely cautious about presuming what your grieving friend needs spiritually. Unless you are confident the Lord is prompting the sharing of something specific, choose instead to simply weep. (Job 42)

- **Don't panic if they wrestle with God and His truths.**

In their distress, everything they know and believe is in the Refiner's flames. Their wrestling will result in the stripping away of falsehoods and the strengthening of Truth in their lives. Fervently and faithfully pray for them to persevere in their wrestling until Truth prevails. If they do, they will emerge refined and fortified—for their good and His glory.

- **If you are praying for them, tell them.** A simple text message is fine: "I'm praying for you right now." But only tell them that if you are actually interceding for them in legitimate, purposeful prayer. They will never tire of hearing it. Never.

GRIEF IS PHYSICALLY EXHAUSTING

Grief is physically exhausting. Words cannot adequately describe the bone-aching, crippling physical fatigue of deep grief. The cumulative energy required—emotionally, mentally, and spiritually—to process the catastrophic impact of death renders one completely and utterly physically depleted. In addition, sleep disturbances are common while grieving, further compounding that already debilitating exhaustion.

- **Pray for your grieving friends.** Pray specifically for their sleep, as nighttime is often extremely challenging for those who grieve. Pray for the Lord to guard their thoughts through the night watches and shield them from the attacks of the enemy. Pray for the Lord to miraculously strengthen and sustain them through their exhaustion—and give them the discernment to recognize what must be done and the peace to let go of what is not necessary.
- **Deliver household necessities.** Items like toilet paper, paper towels, disposable plates, utensils, and grocery

staples are always helpful. Before delivering, text to ask if it's okay to leave the items on the porch. This releases them from the emotional strain of hosting a visitor while they are depleted, yet gives them the opportunity to invite you in if they feel up to a visit.

- **Offer specific, practical help.** Instead of "Let me know if you need anything," ask: "I would like to bring a meal one night this week; may I?" or "I would like to clean this week; which rooms would be most helpful for me to tackle?" Consider pooling resources with friends to provide lawn care or house cleaning services for a season.
- **Give gift cards for meals.** Gift cards are a fantastic way to help. They provide a practical solution for dinner and, eventually, a gentle invitation for them to step out of the house when they feel ready.
- **Be patient and understanding.** If they decline an invitation, recognize that they may simply be too exhausted right now. This is not a rejection of your friendship; it is a result of their grief. Try again later. Your unwavering consistency is a reflection of God's steadfast love.

GRIEF IMPAIRS MENTAL ACUITY

Grief impairs mental acuity. Memory, focus, concentration, and comprehension are often the first casualties of deep loss. The overwhelming nature of grief doesn't just dull these faculties; it can feel like it obliterates them. Short-term memory and the ability to focus become scarce resources. Because focusing on a single task is a struggle—let alone concentrating for any length of time—comprehension often fails as well.

I can testify to the accuracy of this well-documented fact. During my own journey, I had to set multiple reminders for every single event, and Post-it notes with reminders scrawled across them were scattered throughout our home. Grief's profound impact on mental acuity was truly shocking.

- **Pray for your grieving friends.** There is so much to be decided and completed immediately following a death that the strain on mental acuity is particularly distressing. Pray for them to be able to remember, focus, and comprehend enough to accomplish the tasks at hand. Pray also for these

cognitive issues to stabilize in the weeks and months that follow.

- **Invite them to get together.** They are squarely focused on surviving each day; it is unlikely they will have the foresight or mental energy to initiate an invitation. However, if you invite them, they may well come—and even if they aren't up to it, they will deeply appreciate being remembered.
- **If they fail to acknowledge your kind gesture, know it is not a lack of appreciation.** They most likely forgot to respond or are simply so overwhelmed that they cannot yet manage it. Cards, letters, and gestures are always appreciated, especially when they arrive weeks, months, or even years later.
- **Don't take it personally if they don't respond to texts or calls.** If they miss a message or an offer to get together, it most likely has nothing to do with you and everything to do with their grief. They may be too exhausted to engage or may have simply overlooked the notification. Do not give up or pull away; remain a steady presence and just try again later.
- **Don't expect them to remember your offers.** If you mention in passing that you would like to get together, they likely will not remember to follow up. Do not assume this means they don't want to spend time with you; assume they are overwhelmed or have simply forgotten.

GRIEF IS AWKWARD

Grief is awkward. If you feel uncomfortable or unsure around your grieving friend, you are not alone; many people experience a gripping fear of saying or doing “the wrong thing.” But remember, it is incredibly awkward for your grieving friend as well. They are navigating a path they didn’t choose and a role they don’t want. In an instant, every relationship they have was altered. In many ways, they are having to relearn how to interact with every aspect of their world while completely overwhelmed.

- **Recognize that greetings can be awkward.** “How are you?” is a surprisingly difficult question to answer. If you can, try an alternative like, “It’s so good to see you.” Don’t panic if you forget, though; most grieving people eventually learn to view “How are you?” as a generic greeting and will find a way to answer that diffuses the tension.
- **Acknowledge the awkwardness.** If you are worried about saying the wrong thing, just be honest. Say, “I don’t

know what to say, and I'm afraid of saying something that might hurt you." In a more intimate friendship, you might also reaffirm your love for them.

- **Don't pretend nothing has happened.** Failing to acknowledge their loss is almost always more awkward than a simple acknowledgment. A short, sincere "I'm so sorry for your loss" is often all that is needed to disarm the tension, especially during your first meeting after the death.
- **If they appear "fine," don't assume they are.** Especially in the early months, appearing composed is often just the result of the tedious skill of restraining grief. The heartache is always just beneath the surface. You don't have to worry about "reminding" them of their loss; it is impossible for them to forget.
- **Participate in conversations about their loved one.** If the conversation naturally drifts toward the person who died, don't panic. If your friend is steering the conversation there, it means they find it helpful to talk about them. Engage with them.
- **Be attentive to social cues.** If they seem to be struggling in a group or trying to end a conversation, help them exit gracefully. This isn't a reflection on the company; it's a sign they have reached their emotional limit for the day.
- **It's never too late to reach out.** If you've let awkwardness or time prevent you from reaching out, don't let it stop you now. Apologize for the silence if needed, and proceed. Eight years later, I would still graciously

welcome someone reaching out, and I believe others would, too.

SOME GRIEFS WON'T END

Some griefs will not end. It cannot be emphasized enough that your friend may continue to grieve for the remainder of their earthly life. If it is their child who has departed, they will. Their hearts won't just ache on the "special days," anniversaries, and holidays, but at completely random times—when an unexpected memory washes over them, when they see others interacting as they once did with their loved one, or upon encountering certain songs, phrases, smells, or places.

Through God's grace, they will become more adept at reeling in and restraining these waves of emotion over time. But because the pain persists, they will always be touched and encouraged by your acknowledgment of the ongoing reality of their grief.

- **Persevere in praying for your grieving friends.** There is no greater gift you can give them. They may be weary and longing for Home; continue to pray for God to comfort their aching hearts and strengthen their faith to persevere. Pray for His sustaining grace to richly abide in them,

enabling them to live fruitfully for Him until He calls them Home.

- **Remember the particularly hard dates.** Mark your calendar for their loved one's birthday and death date, as well as other significant milestones like wedding anniversaries or diagnosis dates. Remember them during each holiday. Telling them you are praying for them during these specific times is a tremendous blessing.
- **Acknowledge their ongoing pain.** If you have been thinking about or praying for them, tell them. As time goes on, very few will continue to recognize the weight they still carry; your acknowledgment ministers to them deeply.
- **Continue to send cards, notes, and messages as you feel led.** They will never tire of hearing that you are thinking of them. As the years pass, those ongoing reminders become more and more precious.

GRIEF WILL TRANSFORM YOUR FRIEND

Grief will transform your friend. In cases of deep grief—such as the death of a child—your friend will no longer be the person they were before their loss. They have been radically transformed by the deep wounds and pain they bear. Yet, if they choose to cling to Christ, they will emerge through His sustaining grace refined and transformed, often with greater strengths and spiritual gifts than ever before. (Romans 5:1-5)

If you humbly follow the Holy Spirit's leading to gently and faithfully walk alongside your friend, you will have the privilege of witnessing the power of God's grace as He—in the midst of their ongoing pain—incomprehensibly redeems their agonizing circumstances, using them for their good and His glory. He will knit your hearts together, and you will both be blessed in the process. (Romans 8:26-28)

Navigating the Change. If you have been absent for a prolonged part of their journey, it may be difficult to pick up exactly where you left off. While you may be the same person, they are not. They are acutely aware that you have missed vital parts of their painfully transformative journey.

It is never too late to reconnect, but do so in a way that allows them to share how they have changed. Don't make assumptions based on who they were before their loss; instead, seek to get to know the person they have become—and are becoming.

IN CONCLUSION, GRACE...

In conclusion, grant them grace. Grant them *grace, grace, and more grace*. Their world has just fallen apart. They are overwhelmed and emotionally, mentally, spiritually, and physically exhausted. Their grief has robbed them of much of their mental acuity. They are only just beginning to understand the full impact of being involuntarily hurled onto this indescribably painful path—one they must now painstakingly learn to walk for the remainder of their earthly days.

This is in no way an excuse for un-Christlike behavior, but it is a powerfully compelling reason for us to be moved with compassion and to lavishly grant them grace.

Prayerfully weigh the heavy task of walking with your grieving friend. Their journey through the shadowed valley is not a short one, and they need friends who will faithfully walk with them for the duration. If you choose to go, it will not be easy. It will be longer and harder than you can imagine. Faithfully walking well with them for the long haul will require inordinate grace, strength, compassion, love, patience, and wisdom that you do not possess—but that God will readily grant if you ask.

Push forward in being the friend God is calling you to be.

Strengthened by His grace and guided by His Spirit, you can succeed in faithfully loving and walking well with your grieving friend. Persevere, and you will be beautifully sanctified alongside them. Your hearts will be knit together in a deep and abiding love that will transcend time—through the gates of glory to eternity—where grief will finally be no more.

“Let love be genuine. Abhor what is evil; hold fast to what is good. Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. Do not be slothful in zeal, be fervent in spirit, serve the Lord.

Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.

Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality. Bless those who persecute you; bless and do not curse them. Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.”

Romans 12:9-15 ESV