

When a Child Dies

A pastor and his wife share principles for helping a family with their loss.

by Peggy and Clayton Bell

Whether you're a pastor or a friend, helping those who grieve requires special wisdom.

1. Although God's love and comfort come through people, comfort is still God's work. Although there is "one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus," we ministers are called to "fill up in my flesh what is still lacking in regard to Christ's afflictions for the sake of his body, which is the church." (Col. 1:24). God alone is the God of all comfort—he is the source, we are the channels.

A competent physician knows how to clean a wound, apply antiseptic, suture where necessary, bandage, and then wait for the natural healing process. A doctor is not a healer. He aids the healing process that God controls and has built into the forces of nature. A good doctor knows his limitations and has the patience to wait for "nature" to heal.

The same is true with the wounds of grief. God is the healer and fellow Christians (whether pastors or laypersons) can mediate his comfort. Yet they also must know how to keep their hands off to allow God to do his own healing.

2. In ministering to grieving people, be convinced of the hope that is ours in Jesus Christ. Did Jesus Christ rise from the dead? Was he telling the truth when he said, "I am going there to prepare a place for you" (John 14:2)? Does his resurrection really give us the assurance of eternal life—as when he said to Mary and Martha, "I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live even though he dies, and whoever lives and believes in me will never die" (John 11:25–26)? Is there a real existence beyond this life known as "heaven"? Does God really forgive sins and accept sinners? Do we have a hope in Christ beyond this life?

The unequivocal answer of the New Testament to all of these questions is a resounding yes! The caregiver can convey this hope on firm ground. The gospel of Jesus Christ is the bandage that binds up the wounds of grief, and the presence of the Holy Spirit is the balm that soothes and comforts raw nerves.

3. Accept the validity of the grief process. Is it wrong for a Christian to grieve? Are tears a contradiction of faith? Or is faith supposed to eradicate tears?

The psalmists often wept during sorrow. In the New Testament, after Stephen had been stoned, we're told, "godly men buried Stephen and mourned deeply for him" (Acts 8:2). Even living that close to Christ's resurrection, the early Christians deeply mourned

Stephen's loss. In 1 Thessalonians 4:13–18, we have the balanced teaching of the early church that we “grieve, but not like the rest of men who have no hope.”

Whether grief comes from death, desertion, alienation of affection, or divorce, tears are natural. Tragically, some devoted Christians believe that grief is inappropriate for one who believes in the resurrection. The attempt to deny the reality of grief through the bravado of faith is terribly destructive. Anyone wishing to minister to those in sorrow must follow the biblical injunction to “mourn with those who mourn” (Romans 12:15), and to endure patiently the tears of those who must face massive new vacancies in their lives.

4. Make sure someone is there when needed. The question asked by people who must call on a person during bereavement is “What shall I say?” But words are not nearly as important as being there. A simple embrace and the words “I’m sorry,” or “I love you,” may be all you need to say. It’s important for the bereaved to feel that they’re surrounded by people who care deeply and who are available.

5. Give the bereaved opportunities to talk about their lost loved ones. Kaleidoscopes of memories and emotions flash across the screens of their minds, and it’s very important to the grieving process for them to articulate these memories. The sympathetic ear is often the best tool in grief therapy.

6. Touch is important as a means of communication. One grieving person told us that after her loss she didn’t hear much that I said, but when Peggy and I sat on her bed and held her hands and prayed, she received strength. During those early days when she would lie crying on her bed, Peggy would sit beside her and rub her shoulders and back, not only to relieve physical tension, but to communicate caring and emotional support.

7. Remember special times in the bereaved’s life. A phone call, a card, or some other response from friends lets people know they are thought of and supported on those days. Each event is a poignant reminder of loss and can reopen the wounds. It’s especially important that the bereaved be supported when such events reawaken grief.

8. Be ready to give readings to those who sorrow. A hand-written list of Psalms and other Scriptures for daily reading and meditation work well. I say hand-written for the same reason doctors hand write prescriptions. When a person is really sick you don’t give a patent medicine, but rather a personalized prescription for healing. Some people need the language of the psalmist to ventilate their own feelings in prayer. Others need the theology of the resurrection to undergird their hopes. Carefully evaluate how these can be blended together.

9. A bereaved person is vulnerable; be discreet and accepting. In the agony of sorrow, things may be said, feelings vented, or secrets divulged which the one ministering must absorb and turn over to the Lord. In grief, as in any other matter of pastoral concern, a cloak of confidentiality must be thrown around the relationship.

10. Be part of a ministering team. In my case, I'm extremely grateful to the Lord for a wife who shares my ministry with me. Peggy's perceptions and sensitivity have been great assets in ministering. She is able to do for widows what would be inappropriate for me to do. Others who are not able to share with their spouses this way will want to draw on wise and compassionate men and women of the church to complement what one person can do.

John tells us that in heaven God "will wipe every tear from their eyes" (Rev. 21:4). Until God does that, it's our privilege to be channels of comfort and hope for those who grieve. It's not easy. But it is God's work. He gives us the magnificent opportunity to lift our eyes and the eyes of others to that one who is life, and who promises reunion and the fullest measure of joy.

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