

When Your Friend Suffers

There's a lot you *can* do to help a hurting friend, even if you think you don't know what to say.

by Jeris E. Bragan

I once had a client, a county politician, who was arrested and charged with sexually propositioning a policeman. The news media had a field day with the ensuing scandal. Although he was a happily married man with four children, my client was also somewhat effeminate. His protests of innocence fell on deaf ears.

His wife was humiliated. His children were tormented at school. Friends withdrew their support. He knew that his career was finished, even though at the trial the jury found him "Not guilty!" in record time.

Outside the courtroom an old friend timidly approached my client. "I know I let you down," he apologized sadly. "I felt so badly for you, and I

wanted to *do something* to help but couldn't. I felt so frustrated."

"I needed the warmth of his friendship, but he wanted to play God. No wonder he was frustrated!" my client muttered later.

Life has rough edges that cut deeply.

The fabric of human existence is riddled with the dark stain of suffering. Life can be brutally unfair. We all know that. More than anything else we need reassurance from our friends that we're loved, wanted, needed, and appreciated when we've been badly hurt. Only a caring friend can restore our sense of value when we feel most valueless.

But little in life leaves us feeling more inadequate or helpless than when we're faced with the bleak reality of a person we care about caught in the throes of concrete suffering. What can we do? What can we say that will make a difference? What if we do or say the wrong thing?

A friend of mine put it simply: "I want to help when a friend is hurting, but I freeze up because I don't know *how*. So I withdraw, and then feel guilty because I know I've let them down."

I think a lot of people share her experience.

In fact, there is little we can do or say to "fix" another's problems or change the circumstances that have caused their suffering. But there *are* specific things we can do that will help them survive the pain, process it more effectively, and then find their own path beyond prison walls of anguish.

Trust God to lead you.

We must come to terms with our own limitations before trying to help somebody else. We're not God, nor are we otherwise omnipotent. We're painfully human, limited in wisdom and resources. Unlike Jesus we can't bring the dead back to life, heal disease, or restore broken relationships. But we can *always* do something meaningful.

I pray before reaching out to touch someone in pain. I ask God for two things: (1) that He will comfort my wounded friend, and (2) that He will give me the wisdom, sensitivity, and creativity to be the answer to my prayer for him.

God takes such prayers very seriously. "Let go and let God" sounds good, but too many people use that idea as a pious cloak to hide behind—a self-serving justification for safe passivity. God loves working in partnership with those who love Him and are willing to serve as a

human vehicle for His healing grace. If I must make a mistake, let it be in trying to do too much rather than too little!

Extraordinary people are ordinary people who pray for God's guidance and then pay attention on a consistent basis to the little things in life that God brings to their attention. They don't squander their time or energy on grand but empty gestures; they focus on what they can do—and then do it!

Only people who trust God to lead them are free enough to accept their limitations and still give the most precious gift of all to a suffering friend: *love*.

Hurting people need to "talk it out" with a friend they can trust to *really* hear them.

Affirm their value by loving them.

Tragedy destroys the neatly arranged pattern of our lives. We feel lost, alone, powerless, and abandoned by God and other people. Like Humpty Dumpty, the meaning of our lives is shattered, broken into a million pieces, and it appears that nobody, including ourselves, can put the broken pieces back together again.

Dick Snyder, an accountant at the Tennessee Christian Medical Center, is one of the smartest men I know when it comes to using ordinary skills to comfort a hurting friend. While walking down the hospital corridor recently, he glanced into an office and saw a mutual friend slumped at her desk.

"Problems?" he asked. She nodded without speaking.

"Do you need to talk?" She shook her head.

He hesitated. "Do you need a hug?" Again she nodded silently, stood up, and let him hug her while she fought back the tears. Although his gesture might have been misunderstood by some, it was a profoundly human act. He preferred to risk being misunderstood to leaving her hurting. He didn't solve her

problem, but his warmth energized her sufficiently to deal with it.

Pastor Conn Arnold is highly regarded by inmates and staff members alike at the Tennessee State Prison in Nashville. It takes him half an hour to move thirty yards through the compound because he stops to hug, back-slap, and shake hands with the roughest convicts behind the walls. "Man, it's good to see you," he tells one. To another: "I really appreciate you." He isn't afraid to openly love people, even prisoners.

"He just makes you feel good about yourself, no matter what might be going wrong, because you know he cares," a prisoner says.

When God wants to hug us, He always sends somebody to put *His* arms around us. That's one way in which people mediate God's grace most dramatically to one another, especially during tough times. But a lot of pain goes unhealed because people He wants to send don't go!

Never assume that your friend knows you love and care for him. During difficult times silence or vague generalities are almost always experienced as indifference. Be direct and specific. Nothing pulls the broken pieces of a shattered life back together faster than the certain knowledge that we're loved by other people.

Let them ventilate.

I accidentally jostled a patient's bed while trying to make him comfortable. "Are you trying to kill me?" he shouted. "Leave me alone!"

An experienced nurse saw what happened. "Don't take it personally," she advised. "Hurting people are touchy people."

Whether wounded in body or spirit, hurting people are indeed touchy at times! They're capable of lashing out angrily at people closest to them. Faith in God is stretched to the breaking point. Marriages and other close relationships often crack under the strain of suffering, often because of what somebody said or didn't say at the right moment.

A warm and caring pastor came to visit me once when I was going through a particularly painful ordeal. He wanted to assure me that God loved me and was working for good in my life, regardless of how things looked at the moment. "If this is an example of God helping me, I don't think I'll survive much more of it!" I snapped.

He studied me thoughtfully and listened while I vented a lot of bitterness

and self-pity. "I know what you mean," he sighed when I finally ran out of steam. "I've had times in my life when I thought I hated God. Fortunately, as things turned out, I'm glad I got over it."

I was startled by such an honest admission. I realized he not only heard my words, he heard beyond them to where I was struggling with issues of faith. He understood the process of grieving, so I could trust him and listen to him when I had nothing more to say.

Hurting people need to "talk it out" with a friend they can trust to *really* hear them. That's one of the important ways in which we sort through the broken rubble of our lives and begin the process of putting the muddled pieces back together again. But we need to talk with somebody who will listen without censoring or lecturing us for outbursts of anger, bitterness, and self-pity.

Grieving is the human response to suffering, and that process follows a predictable, if not serenely peaceful, spiritual sequence. First comes shock, that paralyzing experience of bewildered numbness, followed by denial: "This *can't* be happening to me!" Most people can easily handle a friend's feelings during these states because they're virtually helpless and incoherent.

But what follows is chaotic, messy, stressful, exhausting, and emotionally explosive: anger, bitterness, resentment, and self-pity. People are capable of saying the most outrageous things when trapped in the quicksand of such destructive feelings. But let them ventilate. *It's part of the process.* As Job discovered, there is no pain-free shortcut to reaching the end of grieving: acceptance.

Angry and bitter feelings are usually disguised in the form of classic why questions: Why is this happening? Why has God allowed this? What have I done to deserve this? Why is God punishing me so harshly? These are "trap" questions because (1) rarely is there an obvious, honest answer, (2) trying to answer the questions only leads to confusion, and (3) the questions themselves are cries of pain, not a serious invitation to abstract theological discussion.

People don't need—nor are they likely to hear—a lecture on the meaning of suffering when their hearts are breaking from despair. Even God didn't answer any of Job's questions until Job got some of the anger and self-pity out of his system. Ultimately, God gave Job Himself, not answers to impossible riddles.

Don't try to answer why questions when friends are grieving. Give them

your God-centered, loving self. Listen to them. Accept your limitations and do what you can. Then God can filter His gracious love through you and begin the process of healing.

Grieve with them.

A friend of mine is a successful and popular pastor. But that hasn't always been true.

He's always loved people deeply, but he was raised in a time when men didn't show their feelings. It was somehow unmanly, a weakness. So he learned to distrust his own feelings, to fear others, and to distance himself from both.

"I preached technically perfect sermons, but nobody was touched. I baptized, counseled, married, and buried people, but my life got emptier with each passing year," he admits.

One day he preached a funeral for a young boy. He looked out over the congregation while delivering his sermon. The grieving mother caught his eye and held it. His mind went blank. She looked up at him hopefully. What did she want? What did she need from him? At that moment the tragic death of a small boy collided with the meaninglessness of his own life and ministry.

He broke down and wept before his astonished congregation.

"I thought I'd failed my parishioners by losing control like that, and I started to apologize to the mother," he told me. "But she stopped me and hugged me. 'Thank you for grieving with me over my baby,' she said."

It hasn't been easy, but he's slowly learned the value of opening up his heart to the feelings of other people. Somewhere in the process he became a more effective pastor, his people are blessed, and his life is richer and more meaningful.

There are many mysteries in suffering we cannot understand. But I'll give you one that we can: The weight of a heart-break shared with a loving friend is cut in half. When the burden is shared with many friends, we can cope with almost anything. We never feel more revitalized than when a friend loves us enough to grieve with us in our pain.

Expect the best from your friend.

For the past eleven years I've served a ninety-nine-year prison term in one of America's most wretched prisons. I live in a demented and demonic world where some of the most violent, vicious, and hate-filled men are packed together like sardines in a can. I'd be a rich man if I had a dollar for every time my life has

been directly or indirectly threatened. Drugs, murder, robbery, sexual perversion, corruption, and every other vice known to humankind flow through here like raw sewage under city streets.

I've struggled through long periods of time when I wondered if God was doing a modern remake of Job out of my life! I didn't think I would survive the first year with either my mind or spirit intact.

But today I'm profoundly happy, contented—and still in prison, with little realistic hope of getting out for a long time. Yet my trust in God, love for people, and general optimism about life has grown stronger with each passing year.

Why?

It's simple: my life is blessed with scores of loving friends. Every month brings many letters, cards, tapes, and notes to my cell from children and adults of all ages. They communicate incredible warmth and affection. They expect the very best from me at all times, not as a demand but as a manifestation of their confidence in me.

It's an expectation that's impossible to resist. It's important to have faith in God and other people. But it's equally important to know that both have faith in us, especially when we're going through hard times. When we *know for sure* that we are loved, both by God and other people, any form of adversity is relatively easy to transcend in time.

Share in the suffering of Christ.

When Jesus entered the Garden of Gethsemane on that last night before His suffering on the cross, He desperately needed His friends. "My soul is overwhelmed with sorrow to the point of death. Stay here and keep watch with me," He said to Peter, James, and John (Mt. 26:38).

He didn't expect them to "fix" His problem; He knew they could not. What He needed was something they were free to give: their prayers, loving support, a listening ear, their empathy, and their confidence. That could not have changed His circumstances, but He would have found comfort in those circumstances.

Instead, they slept.

Let it not be said that we slept when the hidden Christ came to us in the form of a suffering friend in need of our comfort.

JERIS E. BRAGAN has completed a bachelor's degree and published two books of short stories and more than fifty articles while serving a sentence in the Tennessee State Prison. He is working toward a master's degree in pastoral counseling.