

How to Minister to Grieving Parents

Nancy Guthrie

When we witness the anguish, the anger, the questions, the devastation that comes to families that experience the death of a child, we find ourselves desperate to figure out what we can do, what we can say, that will truly help. In the retreats my husband and I host for couples who have faced the death of a child, participants often talk about the ways people have “been there” for them in the midst of the worst pain they can imagine, as well as the ways people have added to their pain. If you could be a fly on the wall at one of our retreats, here is some of what you would hear them say about how best to minister to them.

SAY SOMETHING

Say something to us, even if it is “I don’t really know what to say.” We’re not looking for any great wisdom or insight. We just want to know that you care and are willing to come alongside us in our sorrow. In fact, to say, “I don’t know what to say” shows a lack of presumption that anything you could say would make this OK. A simple “I’m so sad with you” is enough. It is your saying nothing that really hurts.

DON’T BE AFRAID

Don’t be afraid to make us cry or to cry with us. We are desperate to know that our child is not forgotten, that we are not the only people who miss him or her. We long to hear the name of our child. But we know you are sometimes afraid to “bring it up,” afraid that you will make us sad. What you must know is that we are already sad, and when you speak to us about our child, you give us a chance to release some of that sadness, and we are assured that we’re not alone.

DO SOMETHING

Don’t tell us to call you if we need anything. We can hardly think straight enough to know what we need. What we need is for people to figure out how they can help and just do it. Tell me that you’re coming over to do the laundry, pick up a grocery list, or mow the lawn—things we would never pick up the phone and ask you to do.

DON’T COMPARE

Don’t compare our pain to someone else’s or say anything that begins with the phrase, “Well, at least ...” You see that we are miserable and want to help us to look at the bright side. But all of your efforts to do so simply serve to diminish our loss.

EXPECT SADNESS

Don't assume our sadness is a problem. We know our sadness makes things awkward. But doesn't it make sense that we would be sad? It's a reflection of our child's worth. We have a lot of tears that need to come out, a lot of firsts to experience without our child that each bring a fresh wave of pain. Sometimes we feel like people want to fix us so we won't be sad, or want us to "get back to normal" when we will never be the same. Instead of asking, "How are you?" giving us the impression that the desired response is that we are "good" or "better," why not ask, "What is your grief like these days?" This shows us that you recognize it is normal and expected that we would be sad for a while.

ENCOURAGE, DON'T PUSH

Don't tell us that we need to move on, but keep encouraging us to move forward. It is our grief that keeps us feeling close to our child who died, and we are so desperate for that. We need you to understand that leaving our grief behind feels like leaving our child behind. But we also need gentle encouragement to begin to invest ourselves in the living, to embrace the future, and to expect and welcome the healing work of the Holy Spirit in our emotions and relationships.

POINT TO GOD

Understand and share our desire to see God use our loss for good, but help us to accept that we might never know exactly what that good is. Even though we don't especially like to have Romans 8:28 quoted at us, our greatest comfort is found in its truth: that God can and will use the worst thing we can imagine—including our child's death—to accomplish something good. But many of us assume it is up to us to discover what that "good thing" is. We have a hard time believing it is true until we find what that is. We're looking for a purpose that is identifiable, justifiable, singular, and individualistic. Remind us that though we might never see in this lifetime how God is using our loss for good, we can be sure He is using it.

NO EASY FIXES

Finally, don't expect that if you only knew the right thing to say or do, the right book or counselor to recommend, that everything would be OK. This kind of loss will hurt a while. Your persistent presence with us, refusing to give up on us, your choosing to be at ease with our sadness and struggle, finding no fixes and few answers, is a great gift to us.

Nancy Guthrie is a teacher and regular speaker at women's retreats and conferences. She is author of "When Your Family's Lost a Loved One: Finding Hope Together."

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