

When someone you love is suffering

Helpless! This one word sums up how we often feel when someone we care about is hurting physically or, emotionally. And to be helpless is to be powerless to change, or "fix" someone or something.

When we feel helpless, we feel handicapped, crippled, unable to make a significant difference in the life of the one we love.



- ✓ Our mother is dying and we can't do it for her.
- ✓ We see our friend being destroyed by alcoholism and we have no control over what is happening.
- ✓ Our grown son struggles through a wrenching divorce and we are unable to ease his pain.
- ✓ Our third former "has no friends" and we have no answers.

Overwhelmed by feeling so helpless, some of us choose the route of non-involvement, or "waiting it out". We in effect abandon the one we care about. Others of us choose the route of offering well-meaning aid or advice. We inadvertently alienate our loved one or prevent that person from owning and dealing with the suffering. Yet others of us, no matter which route we take, can't help but worry endlessly, thus jeopardizing our own

welfare.

This note attempts to help you recognise the opportunities present in the midst of the suffering you and your loved one are undergoing. You feel helpless, yes, and someone you care about feels helpless, but opportunity and challenge abound here to develop or deepen friendship, to build intimacy and to offer unconditional love.

Working your way through

For over 20 years I have had the privilege of serving suffering dying and grieving persons, I want to share with you some of the most important insights gained.

Take the initiative

Even though we may feel inadequate, out of control, without answers and afraid, we must admit these painful feelings and risk getting involved. We must reach out to the person we care about.

- A simple note,
- a kind word,
- a gentle touch,
- a listening ear

can mean so much to someone bearing a weighty burden of pain. I once heard friendship described as a sharing of hearts. Exciting possibilities for friendship occur when two or more vulnerable people share their feelings, fears and tears.

Through sharing with suffering persons I know I have become more fully human.

Be a good student

Someone once shared about his brother Tom, a young man with Down's syndrome. Since 1970 I have been his legal guardian. I have given a lot of myself and my life to Tom, but if he were to die before me, I know I would miss most, the many

gifts I have received from him. Revelations about people and life and God. Suffering people are often our best teachers. They show us the true meaning of patience, compassion and faith, and we need to be effective receivers and learners.

We feel quite uncomfortable with an invitation to enter into someone's pain before doing something about it, still when we honestly ask ourselves which persons in our lives mean most to us, we often find it is those, who instead of giving much advice, solutions, or, cures, have chosen rather. to share our pain and touch our wounds with a gentle and tender hand.

- Henri J. M. Nouwen

It is also important to watch our language in caring for the suffering. If we cannot identify with the suffering person's experience, if we have not been there, then we need to be careful about using expressions like "I understand" or "I can imagine what its like". Even if we have been through the experience, we need to appreciate the differences in each story.

Beware of what you say about God

When we are not comfortable being helpless, we can make some very inappropriate comments' about God, God's will, God's plan or God's role in suffering.

I believe in God's presence in the midst of suffering, but often God's footprints are difficult to find. When I encounter tragic situations that appear to have nothing of God in them, I pray to become more comfortable with mystery and ambiguity

In ministering to suffering people, I rarely have just the right biblical passage to console or the right answer to all the agonising why's.

A friend of mine has a difficult time singing the hymn "*Yahweh, I know you are near*". She has struggled mightily with God's apparent distance in her life after the death of her husband.

A mother, who experienced the death of two teenage sons by suicide, once told God, "You are not my father as was taught.. You are a lousy Shepherd".

When someone we loves suffers, we suffer with hat person, and we would not have it otherwise, because the suffering and the love are one, just as it is with God's love for us.

Frederick Buechner, "The Hungering Dark".

We need to let suffering people vent their frustration, anger, even hatred toward God. For until a sufferer acknowledges despair, she or he cannot befriend it I've learned that many people curse God on the difficult journey of moving to deeper praise and blessing.

Be aware of available resources

In God we are present with our loved one precisely in his or her, suffering. Relaxing in trust then would not at all mean forgetting that person. Rather, our concern turns from a frantic but useless worry to a caring which we can find strength and in which we trust there is some real benefit for the one we're concerned about. Prayer then can override our own need for reassurance and in a real way be for our loved one.

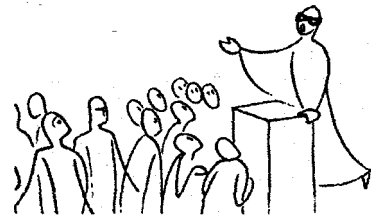
-Leonard Bowmen.

I receive many phone calls from or about people who are suffering. I perceive myself as a switchboard operator trying to link these people with existing media resources, support groups, or professionals in the area of pastoral ministry, pastoral counselling, and healthcare. Suffering persons can take comfort knowing that a network of caring people stand ready to support them. A few phone calls can yield much. Those of us concerned about suffering

loved ones need to be careful about doing too much alone. Even though we may have the best of intentions, we might be acting out of ignorance or lack of understanding of the real problem and end up being more hurtful than helpful. Goodwill is not enough in every situation, special skills which we may lack are often necessary. In many cases we need to turn to more qualified resource persons as mentioned above.

Avoid the fix-it approach

Our good intentions can also go awry if we try to take control of a situation that the suffering person really needs to deal with him or herself. Each of us must somehow come to terms with the sorrowful events of our life and with our unique pain. Trying to shoulder another's cross may actually hinder that person from feeling that pain, taking responsibility for it and making life changes that might alleviate it. We can feel for another but we can never suffer for another.



Sometimes listening is the most precious gift we can offer a suffering person. While we might prefer to "fix" the problem - to give advice - voice an opinion - take matters into our own hands, so often the most consoling and empowering action we can take is to listen. We need to empty ourselves of our own need to be wise or powerful or helpful, so that we can pour out the sorrow from an over-flowing heart.

Take care of yourself

My first commandment in this ministry is

"You must take care of yourself"

I believe we are called by God to empty ourselves but not kill ourselves for others.

We must be aware of our limits. we need to know what we can and cannot offer to someone who is suffering. Sometimes what we can give depends on our relationship with the person. or the circumstances of our own life.

No one can be there for others 100% of the time We need to

balance our lives. In order to be effectively present to the suffering, we must build in ample free time for ourselves, to relax and enjoy things that we choose to put on our calendar or that we want to do spontaneously There are times when it is vital to say no to others and yes to ourselves, even if we feel guilty in doing so.

Take heart

A friend with a life-threatening illness has spent many days in hospital during the past four years. She recently told me that once, after facing yet another set back, she confronted God and asked why this was happening to her. Then with a smile on her face and out of the depths of a rich inner peace, she shared with me how she suddenly realised she had to "stay the story" and not abandon her relationship with God.

When we are helpless, we may have more questions than answers. God may seem very far away We may be tempted to exit from the story of the person we care about or from the story of our faith.

As my friend has taught me, however, its precisely at these moments that we need to stay in the story. For in the midst of crisis lie further opportunities for loving unconditionally and becoming more fully human.