



Sooner or later, nearly every one of us will be called upon to minister to someone who is suffering, grieving, or in pain. While it is natural to want to say the right thing, to make them feel better, or to make sure their faith is firm, often what a hurting person needs is someone to simply listen. Especially when we are far away and cannot offer physical help or comfort, listening is the most important thing we can do.

As we continue growing in our theme of “listen”, this month we will reflect on how to listen to others' grief and pain.

Listening is difficult

‘Weep with those who weep’ (Romans 12:15). *‘Carry each other’s burdens’* (Galatians 6:2)

These are familiar verses, and all of us could quickly recite them and agree they are important. And yet we struggle to do it. When faced with someone in the depths of grief, we feel so helpless and awkward.

One of the most important ways to ‘carry burdens’ is to listen well to those who are suffering. Listening to someone who is grieving can be difficult because:

- Their overwhelming circumstances and emotions make us uncomfortable.
- It may feel exhausting, especially if they are repeating themselves and want to talk for a long time.
- We don’t know what to say.
- We want to make them feel better, but don’t know how.

To listen well, we must be prepared to overcome these difficulties. Here are three practical things you can do to show love by listening to a person who is suffering.

1) Do not correct or challenge them (yet)

To ‘mourn with those who mourn’ we have to be willing to let them feel their feelings. We have to actually be willing to be sad with them. When someone is suffering, depressed, or grieving, sometimes they make statements like ‘God hates me. I’m a failure. There is no hope...’ We know these things are not true, so we say, ‘Don’t say that!’ or ‘Where is your faith?’

While that is a natural response, there is a better way to ‘weep with those who weep.’ Remember the reminder in James 1:19 to be ‘quick to listen and slow to speak’. The more someone is suffering, the slower we should be to speak! Instead of challenging them right away, try to listen and understand that they are really sharing their feelings: ‘I feel like God hates me. I feel like a failure. I feel hopeless.’ Comfort their feelings instead of correcting their theology. Say things like, ‘I’m so sorry you feel that. That’s an awful feeling to have.’

If you listen long enough, they may self-correct. Eventually you will hear them say, ‘I know

God doesn't really hate me.' Or, there may come a time to offer a word of truth like, 'I know you feel hopeless, but is that what the Bible tells us?' But remember—be VERY SLOW to speak. Only after the person feels the love of God through your patient listening and comfort will they be able to hear the truth about that love.

2) Draw out the conversation

Because grief is uncomfortable, we can be too quick to change the subject (or cut them off with 'I'll pray for you!'). Often, what the hurting person really needs is to keep talking about it. We can 'mourn with those who mourn' by asking questions that help them process and express their feelings. Simple questions like 'tell me more', 'how did that make you feel', and 'what else' can encourage them to keep sharing. Be careful that your questions are to help them process their experience and feelings—this is different from asking probing questions that give you information to satisfy your curiosity.

3) Name their feelings

With the best intentions, we often jump right to offering words of encouragement. Someone shares that they feel hopeless, and we respond, 'Remember that God works all things together for the good of those who love Him!' But someone who is suffering may feel hurt by these quick words instead of being encouraged. They may feel that their experience is wrong or that you are telling them to 'snap out of it' and stop feeling bad.

Another common mistake is to try to solve their problem. To someone grieving the death of a child, we might be tempted to say, 'You are still young. You'll have another baby.' But remember that the Bible does not say 'help the mourner stop mourning.' It says to 'mourn with those who mourn.' Do not try to solve the problem.

So what should we do instead of trying to solve problems or giving them words of encouragement? One helpful thing you can do is to name their feelings. For example, as you listen, they may tell you that they can't sleep, they don't know what will happen, and they're struggling to pray. You may say, 'It sounds like you feel scared. Is that right?' Often when someone is suffering, naming and acknowledging their feelings can free them to take the next steps in healing. It also helps you know how to pray for them and with them.

Some of these listening skills do not come naturally for most of us. But any of us can do them with practice. I encourage you to keep this month's Day of Prayer devotion in a place where you can easily find it again next time a friend, family member, or coworker is suffering.

Below is a devotional to help you process and reflect on listening to others who are walking through pain and grief.



Devotional Study

JUNE

Listening to others Grief and Pain

Read the story of Jesus and the sisters from John 11:30-37

How did Jesus respond to Mary's grief? (v. 33 and 35)

How is Jesus' response similar and different to the way you typically respond to others' grief?

How does Jesus' response in John 11 give us permission to simply sit with the person in their pain? Why might that simple response be so powerful?

Think about some of the times that you have sat with someone going through pain or suffering. Have you found it 'awkward'? What have you learned about these situations that you might be able to share with others? How have you seen the Holy Spirit minister through you to others during these times?

Has anyone ever listened well to you in a difficult time? When have you experienced someone mourning with you and bearing your burdens?

Read John 14:16,26, 1 Cor. 12:7, Gal. 5:22-25

Perhaps the most powerful tool we have to be a good listener is the presence of the Holy Spirit within us. Reflect on the role of the Holy Spirit. What can we take with us from the verses above that will help equip us to listen to others in their pain and grief? What promises are we reminded of in these verses that will help us, even in the awkward situations, to minister to those enduring pain?