

10 WAYS TO SAY “I CARE” Creative Ways for Ministering to Those Who Grieve by Fran Caffey Sandin

“Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep” (Romans 12: 15 NASB)

Rejoicing comes easily when something good happens in the lives of friends. But when death and its sorrow invade a home, we often find ourselves struggling for an adequate response.

We sincerely want to help, but deep inside we’re afraid of saying or doing the wrong thing, not being “strong” enough, or of becoming depressed. Who among us ever feels sufficient when death intrudes? And yet, that is when we’re needed most of all.

The good news is that, in spite of our human weaknesses and fears, God can use us to uplift and encourage the bereaved. When the Holy Spirit dwells within our hearts, He will be our guide, our comforter. He knows another’s needs; He knows our capabilities. As we pray, seeking His wisdom, He directs us to take action. When our thoughts give birth to Spirit-led activities, we actually become the answer to someone’s prayer. The resulting consolation exceeds human understanding.

This truth became a reality to me years ago when our youngest son, Jeffrey, died suddenly of meningitis. As a registered nurse, I had studied about grief and observed it in the lives of others, but when it happened to me, I was overwhelmed by its total impact—mentally, physically, emotionally, socially, psychologically, and spiritually. Thankfully, I did not have to face that life-shaking sorrow alone.

As loving family members and friends demonstrated compassionate care, I found that whether one is a casual acquaintance or a close friend, there are many creative ways of ministering.

Here are ten suggestions:

1. Be present, even if you don’t know what to say. Give a hug, squeeze a hand, and don’t be afraid to cry.

Physical contact with friends gave me strength. Not only was I energized, I was touched spiritually. Through loving hugs, God seemed to be sending a message, “See, I AM with you. I haven’t forgotten your hurts, and these friends are here to show My love.”

Grieving Christians know intellectually that God is always with them, but the pain is so great, they may feel momentarily forsaken. They may even repeat the words of Jesus Who cried out from the cross, “My God, My God, why has Thou forsaken Me? (Matthew 27: 46 NASB).

The unsaved also feel abandoned. Taking time to be near this friend in need may be instrumental in softening his heart toward the Gospel message on some future occasion. Unconditional love is not soon forgotten and may lead your friend to seek the joy of salvation.

2. Say something positive about the one who died.

A common misconception is that it is better not to talk about the person who died for fear of making grief more difficult. Actually, the opposite is true. A kind remembrance is comforting and helps the afflicted feel that his loss is being shared by others.

For example, I appreciated a church nursery worker who, shortly after our son’s death, told me how much she enjoyed having our seventeen-month-old in her room. She reflected about his antics with the other children as she recalled, “He was such a joy. I’ll never forget the way he looked up at me with those big blue eyes.”

3. Sign the register at the funeral home.

The simple act of taking time out from a busy schedule to visit the funeral home can be very expressive. We experienced this with Ruth, a waitress at a restaurant where our family occasionally went out for dinner. She was always smiling, friendly, helpful, and interested in our three pre-schoolers.

Although we had no other contact with her, Ruth came to the funeral home and signed the register prior to Jeffrey's memorial service. I was touched by her action. It meant so much to me to know that our family was not "just another customer" to Ruth. I'll always remember her kindness in letting us know she cared.

4. Send flowers, sympathy cards, or simple memorial gifts.

I never realized the significance of flowers until I received them. The colorful blossoms and green plants made me feel surrounded by the warm love of my friends.

When the mailman delivered beautiful cards, the personal notes and scriptures seemed tailor-made, just what I needed for the moment. A few contained comments such as..."I know I should have sent this card sooner, but..." My response was, "No, it was right on time." It is never too late to send a card.

5. Encourage the grieving by reassuring them of God's love, but refrain from preaching.

Allowing God to use disappointments for our good is a conscious decision that takes time. In the early stages of grief, one does not have the emotional or spiritual energy necessary to handle weighty spiritual matters.

I remember feeling upset toward an elderly lady who said, "Well, Honey, God just needed another beautiful flower for His garden in Heaven."

That made me angry as I thought, "God can make His own garden without taking my son, and besides, Jeffrey is a person, not a plant." Refraining from speculations about God's purposes and reason, and simply giving reassurance of God's love, grace, or other character qualities, will be appreciated by those who grieve.

6. Take food to the home in disposable containers.

When plunged into grief, I found the most ordinary tasks impossible. I was so numb, I couldn't have prepared a meal if the ingredients had been lined up in front of me. That is why I was so grateful for sensitive friends who brought food. Items not used right away were tucked away in the freezer for handy use later.

It was convenient to have food brought in disposable pans so we didn't have to worry about returning the containers. However, one thoughtful friend came by, picked up all the empty dishes and returned them to their owners. Even if you know nothing about the family's culinary preferences, don't hesitate to prepare something. It doesn't have to be elaborate.

7. Help the family with practical needs.

Special friends can be extremely helpful during the immediate time after a death. Here are some ways you might think about helping a close friend: make telephone calls to relatives and friends; offer to keep the children; straighten the house; take care of the laundry or any unpredictable catastrophes (for example, our dishwasher broke and my friend called the repairman, stayed with him until it was fixed, and then paid for it.)

You could also spend time receiving guests, answering the telephone or receiving food and gifts so your friend can rest, or offer to run errands and take care of shopping.

8. Be a good listener and be patient.

Death is such a crushing blow that it takes time for a person to come to grips with its reality. From my

own experience, I knew mentally that my son would not come back, but emotionally, I didn't want to believe it.

My friends were patient to listen as I recounted the events surrounding Jeffrey's death, again and again. This repetitious review seemed helpful in bringing my body, soul, and spirit into accepting the fact that the shock I'd experienced actually did happen.

A good friend will understand that heartache needs expression, and tears will be common for the first six weeks or so. Crying is a healthy way to begin dealing with the agony of death.

9. Acknowledge grieving children in the family.

Children experience a great sense of loss and are deeply affected by death. However, their reactions are sometimes unpredictable and may seem inappropriate at times; they cannot verbalize their feelings very well. With all the extra guests, confusion, and adult concerns, children may be unintentionally ignored. They need special attention most of all.

When our son died, his brother, Steve, was five years old, and sister, Angie, was three. Each of their Sunday school teachers visited our home at separate times. One brought a small green ivy in a planter appropriate for Steve's room, and another brought a small plate of cookies for Angie. Each teacher spent a little time hugging and loving the children. I'll always remember their thoughtfulness and the children loved receiving their own special visitors.

10. Share a book that has helped you.

A book that my husband and I found helpful for the children was *If I Should Die, If I Should Live* by Joanne and Benjamin Marxhausen. We read it over a number of times with them. It strengthened us as well.

If you've read an account of someone's experience which concludes on an encouraging note, consider taking a copy to your friend with prayers that he will look toward a brighter day. Realizing that others have made it through the dark valley will strengthen him and give him hope that joy can dawn in his life again, too.

Perhaps these suggestions will assist you as you minister to grieving friends. You may not be able to say, "I understand," but you can communicate "I care," the most important language of the heart.

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