

10 Ways to Care for Someone (When Nothing Will Fix It)

January 5, 2017 by Erin Wathen

You just can't imagine what they must be going through. You don't know what you could possibly do to help. You have no idea what to say.

Thing is... No one does. There is no magic formula of care and concern, words and deeds that will make this terrible thing better for this person you love. The death of a spouse, the cancer diagnosis, the divorce, the job loss, the debilitating accident, the incarcerated daughter... You can't fix it. Very often, not even a professional can fix it—not a doctor, not a lawyer, not a minister or a counselor or a financial consultant or a mechanic. None of these hold the key to vanishing this awfulness, and that is why it's a crisis and not just a bad day.

There is no one right thing to say or do; but there are always meaningful things you can say or do.

One of the great privileges of ministry is not just getting to walk alongside people in difficult times; but bearing witness to the ways that people show up and care for each other in times of crisis. Here are just a few ways that I have experienced community caring for those in need, even when there are no easy answers.

1. **Call.** "I don't know what to say" is no reason to drop out of someone's life when stuff gets hard. "I'm thinking of you" or "I just wanted to check in with you" will suffice as an opener. The person may or may not want to engage further, but you can let them guide that and then just roll with your gut from there. If calling does not feel appropriate (or maybe you are not "call and chat" kinds of friends) you can always just
2. **Send a card.** Or a text. Or a Facebook message. Perhaps a smoke signal. You do you, but a word of comfort or solidarity is always appropriate and appreciated. This way, the person can respond to you (or not) at their leisure, especially if they are getting swamped with cards. Or smoke signals.
3. **Take Food.** The classic church lady comfort casserole is always an option (and my personal favorite meal in the world). But nowadays, you have so many other options. Pick up a prepared meal from the grocery store. Or send a gift card to a favorite restaurant or take-out place. No matter what kind of mess and drama may be, folks still have to eat. Alleviating the hassle of shopping and cooking and cleaning up (not to mention the expense) of even one meal is more than a nice gesture—food is a love language. That's the gospel truth. (Pro-tip: if there will be many people dropping off meals, make sure there is a point person to coordinate. Otherwise, there will be 8 lasagnas and 4 broccoli casseroles on week 1, and then nothing but jello salad for months. Not ideal). Also, maybe think smaller. A meal might not be practical in some situations, but homemade bread or a fruit basket might be just the thing.
4. **Provide a service.** In my second pregnancy, I took it super easy so I wouldn't wind up on bed rest (like I did the first time). A family in my church owned a cleaning company, and they sent their people over to clean my house. It was amazing. Granted, a whole-house cleaning is an extreme option. Think outside the box if a dusting brigade is not available to you (or if

showing up with a toilet scrubber seems intrusive. Because it probably is). You could always mow the yard, or make a grocery run. I know a mom whose neighbor picked up her kids from school every day while she was going through chemo. And I knew a man whose wife died, and he had lots of people coming over to the house, and there was this huge snow (of course). When he looked outside in the morning, a guy from church—who he didn't even know very well—was out there shoveling his driveway and sidewalk. I mean... COME ON. That right there is the Body of Christ.

5. **Share reading material.** Maybe it's something that you found helpful/uplifting when you were going through a similar hard time. Or maybe it is a completely brainless escape read that a person could enjoy while sitting in a hospital waiting room (or some other purgatory). Just maybe stay away from the precious inspirational section at the Christian book store...
6. **Empathize.** But don't share horror stories. It's a fine line, especially if you have lived through a similar ordeal. But it can be done gracefully, as long as you are mindful of that nuance.
7. **See the whole person.** This one is maybe one of my greatest learnings in ministry. When folks are going through something terrible—I mean, really, really terrible—believe it or not, their first inclination is to not go to church. You'd think that church would be exactly the place to go when you are in the trenches, but no. I used to think it was because people felt too raw and exposed and vulnerable; and because our culture preaches this false gospel of perfection and makes us feel like we can't go out in public if we've been dumped or lost our hair, or if our mascara is going to run. There is some of that in play, but I don't think it's the main thing. No, people in crisis tend to nest in mainly because everywhere they go, people want to talk about their awful situation—and nothing else. I'd imagine it's pretty exhausting to walk into a crowd and have to answer 100 questions about chemo, or divorce lawyers, or rehab, or whatever. I know it comes from a good place, this care and concern of the community. In many cases, it may even feel insensitive to talk about anything other than the crisis, when you know the person in front of you is suffering mightily. But remember that they are still a whole person. A conversation about baseball or beer or some neighborhood gossip might actually be a blessed invitation to some normalcy. And speaking of normalcy,
8. **Invite them to stuff.** One of my church folks is counseling a group of her daughter's friends... The girls need some guidance in supporting one their tribe who just lost a parent. One of my suggestions was...keep including her. For the birthday parties, the sleepovers, the pizza nights, etc. She can say no if she doesn't feel like being around people, but always put it out there and keep her in the circle. Same goes for grown-ups; keep extending the offer of dinner, last minute happy hour, a quick coffee, or a night out. Be understanding if they say no, but give them the opportunity to turn you down. Never assume people "won't feel like" hanging out.
9. **Give a gift.** Who doesn't love presents?? In a particularly difficult time, a care package or small gift can go a long way. You might also consider a gift in memory or honor of someone, to a cause that would strike a meaningful chord.
10. **Just show up.** When in doubt, just be there. Sit at the kitchen table or at the hospital; show up for the moving day (all manner of crises often perpetuate a moving day); be there for the court date, or the last day of treatment, or the burning of the exes' stuff. (I'm not condoning this kind of behavior. But like I say, you do you. Your people will be my people). Any way you

shake it, this is the ministry of presence. Sometimes it's all we've got. But it's usually enough.

Take care of each other out there, folks. Wishing you all a New Year full of health and happiness, being God's people together. Peace.

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