

When Helping Hurts



It was about 9:30 p.m. when the heavy hospital room door closed on the last of entire day's worth of visitors. Keith, my husband, had been diagnosed with a life-threatening autoimmune disease and had been in the hospital for several weeks. Our amazing support system of friends and family wanted to see him in person and show their support.

As the day had progressed, I watched my usually strong and energetic husband, now fragile with disease, become wearier with each new visitor. At times the fatigue would become too much, and he would just close his eyes in the middle of a conversation. The left half of his face was paralyzed, and I could see the smile on the right side grow more faint with each passing hour. It was awkward, wanting people to feel welcomed and show our thanks after they had made a long drive to come see him while at the same time trying not to encourage a long visit. By day's end, I felt drained. I could only imagine how Keith felt as he fell asleep.

The 26 days Keith spent in the hospital, followed by months of downtime in our home, gave me a new perspective on what it means to help others. There are things to be aware of when we step in to be helpful, whether in times of celebration, such as a birth, or a time of suffering. We all want to jump into action, but following guidelines will ensure that your ministry actually helps instead of hurts. Here are four to consider.

Pray.

Cover those in need with prayer. Pray alone, and pray as a group. During a critical time in the hospital, our church set up a 24-hour-a-day prayer chain, with each person committing to pray for one hour. We were humbled, blessed, and encouraged by this, knowing that even at 3 a.m. Keith was being prayed for. I recently read about a church family who surrounded the home of a dying man; they held hands and prayed together outside as he went home to be with the Lord inside the walls of his earthly house.

Bring food.

Assign one person to create a schedule so the family doesn't have to keep track of it. A basket of healthy fruit and snacks in the hospital or at home helps greatly. If you bring a meal, make it something that can go in the freezer or can be refrigerated for several days. Quick delivery of a meal is best. This isn't the right time to bring your family to visit. Always pay attention to dietary requests.

Listen to the requests of the patient and family.

If they ask for no visitors, don't consider yourself an exception. On the other hand, if the person or family is lonely and asks for company, go see them in person. In all cases, don't invite yourself; it's hard for people to say no. If you do visit, always keep your visit short; no more than 30 minutes is best.

Help with everyday needs.

When life changes, everyday responsibilities still remain. Mowing, gardening, house cleaning, grocery shopping, auto maintenance, and child care may be needed. This list can get long and is different in every situation. Take the time to assess the needs of each family or individual.

God calls us to come beside those in need. Part of doing that is serving in a way that is most helpful and most easily received. Sometimes this requires putting our own desires aside. When we do so, we will make an impact that will be remembered and appreciated for life.