

What Not to Say to Someone Who's Suffering

“Helpful” words can do more harm than good.

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“What you’re going through isn’t as awful as you think it is. And if you just had more faith or a more positive attitude, you would feel better. You need to cheer up and remember this is all for the best. I know, because my situation was much worse and I made it through joyfully. So if you need me for anything, advice or otherwise, just call.”

If those words don’t sound horrifying to you, perhaps you have never been the recipient of unhelpful “help.” I have been on the receiving end of insensitive comments and it’s been painful. But if I’m honest, I’ve offered untold thoughtless remarks as well.

We all want to support our friends who are struggling. We all want to offer the perfect insight that transforms their perspective. We all want to help them find joy in the present. But in our attempts to comfort, we often say the wrong thing, adding to their pain instead of alleviating it. I know because I’ve done that. Far too often.

When we dispense that kind of “help,” our friends feel judged, misunderstood, and lonely. Their burden feels heavier, not lighter. They don’t know if they can trust their hearts with anyone. From being wounded to wounding others, I’ve learned five things not to do when a friend is suffering.

1. Minimize

There are countless ways to minimize another’s suffering, and most of them involve implying what she is going through really isn’t that bad. It’s not as bad as she is making it seem, not as bad as other people’s problems, and not as bad as it could be.

How it Can Sound:

Count your blessings. You have so much to be thankful for. Look on the bright side. Compared to starving orphans in Africa, this is nothing. My neighbor has been through even more than you and was able to trust God through it. You should talk to her. You should be over this by now. I’m not sure why it’s still such a big deal to you.

How it Can Make the Sufferer Feel:

When people minimize our struggles, it magnifies our pain.

Misunderstood. It may seem like refocusing our attention will help us forget our problems, but it usually has the opposite effect. When people minimize our struggles, it magnifies our pain. We feel judged. Unappreciated. It makes us want to explain our misery in excruciating detail, to get corroboration that our situation is difficult.

2. Criticize

Criticizing someone is passing unfavorable judgment on them or expressing disapproval. When life is falling apart, disapproval can feel like a dagger. Criticism wounds by implying the sufferer is not measuring up. Is somehow deficient. Is somehow unspiritual. Suffering friends need love

and support, not condemnation. No one handles life perfectly; they don't need to be reminded of their perceived failures.

How it Can Sound:

I hate to say this, but you might have brought this on yourself. Maybe you'll learn something from it.

If you had enough faith, things could be much better. Healing is in your hands—you just need to believe.

People are tired of hearing your complaining. Can't you talk about anything else?

How it Can Make the Sufferer Feel:

Hopeless. Being criticized when we are at our lowest point leaves us despondent. True, we may not be healing as fast as others. Perhaps others trust God more than we do.

Maybe we are preoccupied with our problems. But in the midst of suffering, more than anything we need grace. We are broken—works in progress. It's hard having things unravel. We need encouragement and acceptance to press on.

3. Moralize

No one wants a sermon in the midst of his pain. Nobody wants pat answers in the hospital. Saying that all things may be absolutely true, but it feels hollow at a funeral. There may be some wisdom in moralizing statements, but they can be crushing when offered at the wrong time. Besides, there is mystery in suffering, and no one knows exactly why it's happening or what good will ultimately come from it.

How it Can Sound:

We need to rejoice in all circumstances.

This is all for the best. One day you'll see.

There are natural consequences. God's laws cannot be disobeyed. But if you confess your sin and change your ways, God will bless you.

How it Can Make the Sufferer Feel:

Judged. In the furnace of affliction, it's hard to see the big picture. Besides, there is mystery in suffering, and no one knows exactly why it's happening or what good will ultimately come from it. Conjecture about these things can feel cold and uncaring. When we want theological answers, we will ask for them. But given at the inappropriate time, they seem self-righteous.

4. Scrutinize and Advise

It's exhausting being peppered with prying questions. Especially when people demand unsettling or uncomfortable details. It's better to wait and let people reveal whatever they feel comfortable sharing. And when they do, refrain from offering advice. Suggestions can be helpful, but it's presumptuous to tell others what to do. We can't "fix" the situation or "fix" them.

How it Can Sound:

What exactly happened? How did you feel? What are you going to do next?

Why don't you take a walk? Or reach out to someone else? You just need to get your mind off your problems.

Have you tried this new treatment? You should see another doctor! My neighbor's second cousin found a miracle cure you should try if you want to get well.

How it Can Make the Sufferer Feel:

Disregarded and condemned. When we are struggling, it can feel intrusive when people ask prying questions. We don't want to be barraged with advice. And when others are constantly telling us what to do, we feel obligated to explain our decisions. Besides, unsolicited advice feels like criticism.

5. Vaporize

Some people virtually disappear when tragedy strikes. They avoid talking to their suffering friends because it's uncomfortable. When they do, conversation is brief and superficial. They may make vague offers of help, or they may say nothing at all. People's presence is the most precious gift they can give us—and their absence is conspicuous when we're suffering.

How it Can Sound:

Call me if you need anything.

<Silence>

How it Can Make the Sufferer Feel:

Abandoned. We need friends to support us now more than ever, so it's painful when we're ignored. People's presence is the most precious gift they can give us—and their absence is conspicuous when we're suffering. Additionally, it's hard to know whom to call when we need something when all we have is vague offers of help.

So What Should We Do?

When a friend is suffering, rather than offering “help” that actually *hurts*, keep these three principles in mind:

1. Sit and listen. Having someone listen as I pour out my heart has helped me more than any words ever have. I just want someone to be there. To weep with me. To say she is sorry things are so hard. To not expect me to have perfect theology. To let me rant. What an amazing gift it is not to feel judged by every word I utter in desperation.

2. Make specific offers to help. Concrete offers are the easiest to accept. Statements like: “I'd like to bring a meal next week. Would Tuesday work or would you prefer another day?” Or “I'm about to go to the grocery store. What can I get you?”

3. Stay in touch. Pray. Write notes. Call or visit. Text. Send little reminders that we're not forgotten.

All of us have let our friends down in their struggles. And all of us have been hurt or disappointed by our friends in our own grief. We cannot perfectly comfort someone else, and we don't need to “fix” our friends. Instead, let's sit with our suffering friends. Cry with them. Support them as they grieve. They need grace to heal.

Remember, our suffering friends don't need a savior. They already have one . . . and so do we.