

Helpful Things To Say To Grieving Parents

by Tim Challies, author of *Seasons of Sorrow*

It can be difficult to reach out to those who are deep in grief. It can be hard to know what to say and easy to believe that our words are more likely to offend than comfort, to make a situation worse rather than better. We sense that our words ought to be few, but also that the worst thing to say is nothing at all.

Having been a bereaved parent who was the beneficiary of so much kindness, I would like to suggest a few things you can say to grieving parents that may prove an encouragement to them—a flicker of light in their time of deep darkness.

“I am praying for you.” This is the one thing every person can do and the one thing that is simplest to say. When a family has experienced a deep loss, you can intercede for them and then, as a means of encouragement, simply let them know that you have been doing so. You may even tell them *how* you have been praying for them—perhaps what Scriptures you have been praying on their behalf. One word from the Word is worth a thousand from anywhere else.

“I will never grow tired of your grief.” A deep loss is very nearly all-consuming. For weeks and even months it can completely dominate a life. The one who is experiencing the grief may soon begin to fear becoming an annoyance to others—to fear they will wonder why he or she isn’t yet over it. It is a tremendous blessing, then, to have one or two trusted friends offer this assurance: “I will never grow tired of your grief.” This makes those friends a safe harbor for expressing sorrow, whether weeks, months, or even years later. It blesses the sufferer to know they will always have someone who will listen patiently as they pour out their broken hearts.

“I’ll stick with you all the way.” Many well-wishers will express condolences in the early days, but few will continue to be present and available weeks, months, or years later. This is completely understandable, of course. Yet there is a place for a small number of close friends to say, “I’ll stick with you all the way.” This is an agreement that they will continue

to be available and continue to initiate good conversations in the latter days as much as the early days. These people may want to schedule regular meetings and check-ins—perhaps breakfast or coffee every couple of weeks at first, then with the gap widening as time passes. These people will want to ensure they live up to their word and truly do stick with their friends all the way.

“Text me any time and say only, ‘I’m having a bad day.’” On days of deep grief, it can be difficult for a grieving parent to reach out for help because it would be too overwhelming to have to offer explanations and answer questions. There is freedom in being able to text someone to say only “I’m having a bad day” with no further explanation and no follow-up interrogation. This is an invitation not to have the other person call and counsel, but simply to stop and pray. That person can be a tremendous encouragement by replying with nothing more than this: “I’ll pray for you right now.”

“Dinner is on me.” When people are deep in grief, little things can become big things. Mourners carry a heavy burden of spiritual and emotional trauma that makes even tasks as simple as preparing meals onerous or very nearly impossible. One of the most helpful things you can do is provide food—whether dropping off a meal (preferably hot and ready-to-eat at dinner time), ordering one through UberEats or SkiptheDishes, or sending along gift cards. This fulfills one of those essential tasks and takes it out of the hands of the one experiencing such difficulty. (Alternatively or additionally, if you are at the grocery store, text and ask, “I’m at the store, is there anything I can pick up for you?”)

“One of my favorite memories is...” A fear of all parents who have lost a child is that their child will be forgotten (which would, in turn, make them feel like their child’s life didn’t matter). For this reason, sharing favorite memories is often a means of encouragement. Most parents long to know those stories and to laugh and cry as they hear them.

“I am thinking of you today.” After the initial days, weeks, and months following a loss, grief tends to reassert itself on occasions and anniversaries. It can be an expression of love and care to get in touch with the family on the birthday of the child who died as well as

on the anniversary of his death. If relevant, it may also be a blessing to be in touch on the day he would have been married or would have graduated, and so on. This is perhaps especially important in the first year—the year of so many firsts.

“What can I do for your kids?” The death of a child impacts the entire family, including older and younger siblings. It may be extremely helpful for friends to step in to babysit younger children and to spend time with or even informally counsel older children. Little gifts or tokens of love for the kids may prove a blessing.

“May I pay my respects?” For many families, it is a sign of love and respect for friends to visit the grave of their loved one. Some may prefer to be there when their friends visit and others will be encouraged simply to know that their friends took the time. But, either way, the family may be blessed to know you have visited the grave and paid your respects.

You may have encountered this article because of my book *Seasons of Sorrow: The Pain of Loss and the Comfort of God*. It is my sincere hope that this book will prove helpful to parents who are enduring the loss of a child. If you plan to give them a copy, consider also including my “Seasons of Sorrow Letter to Parents” which you can download and print. You can find it at www.challies.com.

