

# How can I help grieving parents?

## Some thoughts on initial responses and care when a family loses a child

Cory and Heather Wessman



**If you are looking for some guidance as to how to show your love and support to parents grieving the death of an infant or young child, consider one or more of the following ideas:**

**(1) Pray:** Pray that God would use this suffering in the lives of the parents to be drawn closer in their relationship with Jesus Christ; or, if one or both of the parents do not yet know Jesus Christ, to be drawn into a relationship with Him. Pray that the marriage would be sustained through this tragedy and that no blame or disconnect would occur between the parents. Pray that the parents would realize their own limitations and reach out and seek the assistance of others, including friends, family as well as professional grief counseling.

**(2) Communicate:** Take the initiative to communicate with the parents even when they don't seem to be communicating with you in return. Don't stop communicating with the

parents just because you may not be sure what to say to the parents. Send the parents an email or a card with an encouraging note, or pick up the phone and let them know that you are thinking about them and praying for them.

**(3) Remember the Child:** If you know the child's birthday or the date of the child's death, send the parents a card on the anniversary of these important dates, letting them know that you are remembering them and praying for them on that day. When you talk to the parents, do not be afraid to bring up memories you have of the deceased child. It's OK to talk to the parents about the deceased child. Parents live with the constant reminder that their child is no longer alive; you don't need to be concerned that, in bringing up memories or talking about the deceased child, you will somehow increase their level of pain.

**(4) Enter Into the Parent's Grief.** After the death of their child, grieving parents cannot continue to live life as usual, as if nothing happened. Similarly, you should not relate to the grieving parents as if nothing happened. The very worst way to relate to a grieving parent is to pretend their child never lived or that their child's death never occurred. If you care enough for the parents, you should enter into grief with them.

**(5) Bring Over a Meal:** Especially in the immediate aftermath of the child's death, preparing a meal is often too difficult of a task for the parents. Having home cooked meals prepared and provided is one of the best ways to provide practical help to a grieving family. In order to keep the family from feeling overwhelmed by offerings of meals, consider setting up a calendar with planned days and offer to manage the calendar for the family.

**(6) Provide Practical Help:** In the immediate aftermath of the death, find ways to be of practical assistance to the parents. Don't tell the parents "Call me if you need anything." Especially right after the child's death, the parents are not of a frame of mind to even know what they need, much less of a mind to call you for it. If you think of some way that you can help them, or if you see a need in their life, bring the idea to them or, based on your comfort level, just go ahead and surprise them with the opportunity. A few ideas are provided below to help get you started on brainstorming.

**(7) Provide God-Centered Resources:** If you have a favorite Bible promise that relates to suffering, write it down and send it in an email or note to the parents. If you have a favorite book, song, sermon, or music album that would provide the parents with an opportunity to worship God through their suffering, provide that to them. Even if the parents won't read the book or listen to the music, they will appreciate the fact that you were thinking of them.

## **Providing Practical Help**

Below are some additional ideas as to how to benefit the parents. You don't need to ask the parents how to help... if you see a need, go ahead and try to fill that need. Its better to say something like, "I'd like to help with/do \_\_\_\_\_. What day this week is best for me to do so?"

- **Help Maintain the Home.** Shovel the driveway or mow the lawn. Clean the house or help with laundry and dry-cleaning.
- **Go the Store.** Many grieving parents find it too painful to go to the store, especially if the parents have memories of spending time at the store with their deceased child. Even if the parents didn't spend time with their child at any particular store, many grieving parents have difficulty being surrounded by large crowds of people. Grieving parents find it difficult to believe that most people are living life "as normal," when the unthinkable has just happened to these grieving parents. For these reasons, you could provide tremendous assistance to the parents by shopping or running other errands on their behalf.
- **Send the Parents on a Trip Together.** As a way of honoring the child and helping the parents, consider purchasing a scholarship to Smile Again Ministries, located in the Brainerd Lakes area. You could purchase the scholarship yourself, or purchase it along with a group of others. If the grieving parents attend a church, ask a church elder if the church might be able and willing to contribute funds towards the cost of the grief retreat to Smile Again Ministries. Alternatively, consider pooling contributions with others in order to send the grieving parents on a trip together, even if only for a weekend getaway. For married grieving parents, anything that would encourage the parents to take time to be with each other would be tremendously helpful for their marriage.

## **Bring a Meal**

If you are one of several individuals who wish to bring meals to the grieving parents, then:

- Use a website such as MealTrain.com to coordinate your efforts with other friends and family members and to give the grieving parents a schedule as to when they can expect a meal.
- Leave a cooler outside the residence of the parents. The meals should be left in the cooler without creating a daily interruption in the lives of the grieving parents, or making the grieving parents feeling obligated to host each of the friends or family members that stop by to leave a meal.
- Don't use the meal to make an unannounced visit to the home and expect the grieving parents to host you. Parents would certainly appreciate the opportunity to meet with you

personally and be supported in their grief, but especially if they have other children in the home, it is probably too difficult for you to expect that they will host you for an unannounced visit.

- Please be certain that if you sign up to bring a meal that you follow through with your commitment, as otherwise the parents (and their hungry children) may be left wondering what happened to the promised meal.

As an alternative to scheduling a meal, you could also make arrangements to prepare and provide a frozen meal to the parents, to be cooked by the parents whenever most convenient for them. Or, if you do not live in close proximity to the parent, consider purchasing and sending the parents a restaurant gift card.

Regardless of how you go about providing a meal, the grieving parents will be very appreciative of receiving it. Not only will the parents have one less daily task to worry about, but they will also be able to spend just a little more time together.

## **Enter Into The Parent's Grief**

A grieving parent can resonate with the deep grief expressed by the psalmist in Psalm 88.

*“...For my soul is full of troubles, And my life draws near to Sheol. I am counted among those who go down to the pit; I am a man who has no strength, Like one set loose among the dead, Like the slain that lie in the grave, Like those whom you remember no more, For they are cut off from your hand. You have put me in the depths of the pit, In the regions dark and deep. Your wrath lies heavy upon me, And you overwhelm me with all your waves. You have caused my companions to shun me; You have made me a horror to them. I am shut in so that I cannot escape; My eye grows dim through sorrow.” Psalm 88:3-9 ESV.*

Just as the psalmist considered himself “among the dead,” so also a grieving parent feels “among the dead.” If you have been around the parents for any period since the death of their child, you have noticed that the parents seem to be living among the dead: they have stopped communicating regularly, cannot seem to laugh or enjoy your company, lack initiative, and might have difficulty eating or sleeping. So how do we, as friends and family, support the grieving parents in their grief? What support can we reasonably expect to provide to them?

## **As you come alongside parents, we think it would be helpful for you to keep three points in mind:**

### **Only God Can “Fix” Grief**

First, we must realize that we cannot “fix” the grief experienced by these parents; it is only through God’s sovereign strength will God bring them through. We are promised, as Christians, that we will suffer in this lifetime. In 1 Peter 4:12, Peter says, “Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery trial when it comes upon you to test you, as though something strange were happening to you.” We are also promised that God will use this suffering for great purposes. While we will not know all of those purposes on this side of eternity, we can trust that God is working His ways in the lives of the parents. Nothing happens to us that is outside the control of God. God continues to love us, and our grieving friends, even through “tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger or sword.” *Romans 8:35 ESV*

“If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?” *Romans 8:31-32 ESV* In light of this, what type of friend would you be if you thought that you alone could somehow “fix” the grief the parents are now experiencing? While your desire to “fix” the parents’ grief is well intentioned, you are powerless to do so. No amount of gifts, notes or diversions will push the parents through their grief. God, on the other hand, is supremely powerful over the entire situation, and will be able, in His timing, to use this time of mourning to accomplish His desired purposes. Therefore, as those who are supporting other grieving parents, we should do what we can to come alongside parents in their grieving, but we should not think that it is up to us to “fix” the grief. We must ultimately trust in God for their healing.

### **Life Is Forever Different**

Second, we must realize that the lives of the grieving parents will never be the same. Grief professionals say that grieving parents will endure various “phases” of grief, such as shock, denial, depression, anger, and others. While the severity of each these phases might decrease over time, no grieving parent is ever “over” his or her grief. Grieving parents who are many years removed from the death of their child will say that, even while the “fog” of intense grief has since lifted from their lives, there continues to be an ongoing hole in their life, a void that cannot be filled. Grieving parents sometimes refer to living life in this type of ongoing grief as “the new normal.” Veteran grieving parents can attest to the fact that, even many years later, they continue to live in this “new normal.”

As you interact with the grieving parents, extend grace to them as they make arrangements for “the new normal.” Do not assume that they will engage in the same activities, enjoy the same hobbies or pastimes, and keep the same schedule. Being involved in certain activities that the parent may have previously enjoyed with the deceased child may now be too painful to endure. The child’s death may have caused a significant change in their outlook and priorities. The parents may have new interests and perhaps even new professional endeavors.

This “new normal” for the parents may mean that extended family members must make new arrangements around holidays and other significant dates, such as birth dates. Some grieving parents will avoid altogether any of the same activities they did before the death of their child. But regardless of whether the grieving parents wish to retain many of these same traditions, extended family members need to be ready to give up these traditions if it will be too painful on the parents.

For some extended family members, losing a Holiday tradition or other tradition is almost like religious heresy. But as Paul tells us in Colossians 3:16-17, there is nothing uniquely spiritual about our traditions, days, and festivals. Don’t push grieving parents into an ongoing tradition just because the extended family wants to retain the tradition. Instead, realize that just as grieving parents must develop a “new normal,” so also must the extended family members develop a “new normal.” As you consider how to go about structuring Holiday traditions after the death of the child, consider asking the grieving parents what traditional activities they would like to be involved with, and which ones they would like to avoid. Whether it relates to Holiday traditions or other events, you can extend a considerable amount of grace to grieving parents by providing them the latitude to develop their “new normal” following the death of their child.

## **Healing Takes Time**

Third, we are called upon to patiently suffer along with the grieving parents. In the book of 1 Corinthians, the Apostle Paul exhorts all believers to bear with each other’s sufferings as “one body.” Paul says, “If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honored, all rejoice together.” *1 Corinthians 12:26* Just as the parents must trust in God’s sovereign strength to pull them through these dark days of mourning, so too must you, as the friends of the grieving parents, trust in God’s goodness to the parents during this period.

In his article, “Waiting for the Morning,” fellow grieving parent Dustin Shramek writes about the responses of his own church to the death of his infant son. Shramek felt that, while fellow church members meant well, what they really wanted was for he and his wife to get through their grief quickly. Shramek believes that, in times such as these, we should not move “so quickly from the affliction to the deliverance and thus minimize the pain in between.” *Dustin Shramek, Suffering and the Sovereignty of God (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006), 184.*

Entering into a mourning period with grieving parents is difficult in numerous ways. It is emotionally difficult to converse with parents who might have more tears than intelligent words to say to you. It takes time to cook the meals, go to the cemetery, and help with childcare. And, most importantly, it takes faith. In times like these, we must ask ourselves if we really believe the Bible's promises for us and for the grieving parents. Are we secretly hoping that the Bible's promises about suffering are not true? Or are we trusting, in faith, that nothing can separate us and these grieving parents from the love of Christ? If God is indeed sovereign over space and time, then we must trust God that He is working in the lives of the grieving parents, even during these periods of their mourning when they do not feel any blessing from Him.

God is sovereign over grief, regardless of how long it takes. Don't judge the parents as to their own faith in God by how long it seems to take to "get through" various aspects of grieving. In seeking to support others in the midst of deep suffering, then we must be willing to plumb the depths of suffering with others, to wait patiently with them during these, the darkest nights of life, the kind encountered by the Psalmist in Psalm 88. As you grieve patiently along with the parents, you are able to provide unspeakable comfort to the grieving parents.

In 2 Corinthians 1:3-5 Paul says, "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our affliction, so that we may be able to comfort those who are in any affliction, with the comfort with which we ourselves are comforted by God. For as we share abundantly in Christ's sufferings, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too."