

# Caregiver Guidelines

Rev. Brian Bill

Have you ever wondered what to say when you're face-to-face with another person's pain? Ever been speechless when speaking to someone who is suffering? Or maybe you've been on the receiving end of some well-intended but insensitive comments like these:

*"I know just how you feel."* You don't. Plus, this shifts attention to you, not them.

*"God will give you another child."* This is insensitive.

*"God must have needed him in heaven."* This feels empty.

*"God told me that he'll heal you."* Really?

*"Time heals all wounds."* Not always.

*"God must be trying to teach you something."* This is patronizing and arrogant.

*"If you do what I did then you'll be better."* Who made you the expert?

*"My aunt Mildred had the same problem..."* Every situation is different. Mildred doesn't matter to the hurting person at that moment.

Our maxims and cute sayings to those who are suffering are not only empty, they can be excruciating. Friends, let's resist trying to "package people's pain." Let's cut out the clichés and jettison the jargon.

In Job 2:11-13 we learn that three friends come to comfort Job in his pain. They do a number of things right – at least at the beginning. Here are some lessons we can learn from this passage to help us help others when they're going through tough times.

- **Hear the hurting.** Job's friends *"heard about all the troubles that had come upon him."* The first step for us is to actually listen when someone is speaking so that we pick up on their problems. When you hear that another person is in pain, write it down so you can follow-up.
- **Sacrifice your schedule.** The next thing they do is *"to set out from their homes."* If we're going to care for the hurting, we're going to have to sacrifice our schedule. If we wait to care until it's convenient, it will never happen.
- **Partner with people.** Catch what happens next – they *"met together by agreement."* It's always a good idea to take someone with you when you hear of a need.
- **Go with grace.** Their goal was to go *"and sympathize with him."* This is the word *"nud"* in Hebrew, which means to rock back and forth. When people go through tremendous pain they often rock themselves back and forth – we're to join them in that.
- **Come with comfort.** This is a similar idea and carries with it the idea of coming alongside.
- **Expect a change in appearance.** When people grieve they often look different, sickness may cause other changes, and they may say shocking things as well. We see this in verse 12: *"When they saw him from a distance, they could hardly recognize him..."*

- **Exhibit your emotions.** When they saw Job in his distress they started to cry: *“they began to weep aloud.”* Don’t be afraid to express your emotions. Romans 12:15 says, *“Mourn with those who mourn.”* One author writes: *“We can forget those with whom we have laughed, but we can never forget those with whom we’ve cried.”*
- **Respond with rituals.** After weeping aloud, they *“tore their robes.”* That was a cultural way of demonstrating that they were all tore up on the inside as Joel 2:13 says: *“Rend your heart and not your garments.”* I’m not quite sure what that looks like today but it probably involves doing something tangible like cleaning the house, bringing a meal, etc.
- **Honor with humility.** In that culture pouring dust on the head was a sign of humility: *“and sprinkled dust on their heads.”* This carries with it the idea of looking for ways to enter into someone’s pain.
- **Sit with the sufferer.** The first part of verse 13 says: *“Then they sat on the ground with him...”* It’s important to get on the person’s level and get as close as possible. I know of a chaplain who has actually lain down next to a person who was dying because the individual was cold.
- **Take the time needed.** These three friends were in no hurry to leave. Amazingly, they were there for *“seven days and seven nights.”* This is called “sitting sheva,” which means “sitting sevens” and has become part of Jewish life. While we shouldn’t overstay our welcome, it’s important to spend time with people when they’re in pain.
- **Be silent in the face of suffering.** Sometimes silence is the best response we can have. That’s what they do in the last part of verse 13: *“No one said a word to him, because they saw how great his suffering was.”* I’ll never forget a hospital visit from a deacon in one of our previous churches after one of our daughters was born. She had stopped breathing several times and I was afraid. As I was pacing around the waiting room, he showed up and gave me a big hug. He then sat next to me and didn’t say a word. It meant the world to me.

We could summarize these caregiver guidelines this way: *Show up* and *shut up*. Don’t stay away and when you come, silence may be better than speech. Incidentally, if you can’t visit, a phone call, email, text, a note on Facebook, or a card in the mail is the next best thing.

Henri Nouwen, in his book *“Out of Solitude,”* writes: *“When we honestly ask ourselves which persons in our lives mean the most to us, we often find that it is those who, instead of giving much advice, solutions, or cures, have chosen rather to share our pain and touch our wounds with a gentle and tender hand.”*

We may have some insight, but we don’t have all the answers.