

# How to Be a Loving Friend to Those Affected by Disability

*By Mark W. Baker, Ph.D.*

Those who suffer from an unexpected debilitating disease or sudden injury often experience the agony of trauma, when they must grieve the life that might have been. Psychological trauma can shatter a person's sense of time and relationships. For almost all who have been traumatized, intense suffering makes them feel very alone and isolated. Whether you have experienced this yourself or not, you will probably find yourself called to come alongside someone experiencing this kind of deep suffering at some point in your life. Having a friend in the midst of suffering can make a world of difference, but it can be very challenging to be a friend to someone in this kind of pain.

## Grief

Everyone deals with grief at some point in their lives. Some suffer from shattered dreams, others from broken relationships, others because of disability, still other from the aging process that comes with nearing the end of this life on earth, and almost all of us suffer from the loss of loved ones who have passed on to the next life. This suffering and grief is not a lack of faith in God or a disbelief in the promise of eternal life. Jesus himself wept over the loss of his beloved friend Lazarus, helping us all to see that grief is the natural response to loss (John 11:33–36).

While grief feels bad and painful, it is actually quite good and healthy. We grieve the loss of our loved ones because we loved them. Grief reminds us of past loves and paves the way for new loves. Good friends welcome the grief of the ones they love. But even knowing that grief is healthy does not make it easier to experience or to come alongside someone who is experiencing it. Knowing the stages of grief can help us manage it in a healthy way in our own lives and support those we love who are grieving.

The stages of grief are denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. These stages do not always go in a straight line, and some people don't experience all of the stages, but this basic guide will help you recognize your own grief and be a friend to those who are suffering the pain of loss.

**Denial:** We resist grief, so we try to deny the reality of our loss.

**Anger:** We get angry because our lives have been interrupted and we are reminded of our own mortality.

**Bargaining:** We try to bargain either with our past or with God: "If only I had done this or prayed this way, then she would still be with me." But bargaining is a misguided attempt to make life make sense in the way we think it should and gives us the illusion that we are in control.

**Depression:** We experience a deep sadness that can feel like clinical depression but is not. This is the sadness that actually prepares hearts for life and love again. We have nothing to fear from this form of sadness because we have a God of love who is ready to fill up our hearts again.

**Acceptance:** We come to accept our new normal. Life after grief is never the same, but when we come to accept our new and different life as it really is, we are ready to let God direct us onto our new path. This is not defeated resignation but true acceptance, and it empowers us to see God's goodness around us.

## The Power of Presence

If you feel called to come alongside someone who is suffering, then it is important to know that the isolation they experience is not due to a lack of faith but is actually a psychological reality of trauma. Jesus himself felt this type of suffering. Perhaps the loneliest moment in all of history was when the Son of God, while hanging on the cross, cried out, "My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?" (Matt. 27:46 NLT). Much has been written about the theological significance of this statement, but one thing is for certain: This statement is not about a lack of faith; it demonstrates a real sense that Jesus was experiencing the psychological trauma of abandonment. Extreme trauma makes any person feel very alone, even if that person is the Son of God. All those who have ever felt isolated from others or abandoned by God in their suffering are not alone; Jesus is with them in their pain.

While Jesus is certainly always spiritually present with suffering people, sometimes he sends his followers to comfort them as well. You may be called to be with someone who is in pain. Standing with someone through intense suffering makes a difference, but you might not be able to tell it at the time. Sometimes those in this type of pain cannot acknowledge your presence fully, or perhaps they will even deny that they need you around. Do not be discouraged if this happens. Your love will have its effect, even if you cannot tell it is being felt, and even if the person you are loving doesn't seem to recognize that they are being loved.

Comfort actually has nothing to do with removing suffering; it is about offering another person strength as they endure suffering. We do not need to remove suffering from our lives or the lives of those we love because we can find God there in the midst of it.

We often misunderstand the point of comforting others. We think we are supposed to come up with pithy phrases that will distract them from their pain or that we are supposed to be an agent of some miraculous cure. These requirements cause many to shrink from even attempting to provide comfort for those who are suffering. We fear that we don't know what to say or what to do. But actually, the true meaning of providing comfort is to simply be with others in their pain. You don't need to know what to say, and you don't need to do anything in particular. What you do need to offer is your presence in a moment of need. This is one of the most powerful sources of emotional comfort anyone can offer to someone who is grieving or in pain.

## Emotional Intelligence, Patience, and Perseverance

Sometimes the emotional suffering that comes with physical disabilities becomes the greater source of pain in a family affected by disability. Knowing the difference between physical pain and emotional pain is the key to being a loving friend. Physical pain is an indicator that something is wrong. Emotional pain is also very important to pay attention to, but it does not necessarily mean that something is wrong with the person experiencing it.

Being in emotional pain is not always a sign of weakness, psychological problems, or a lack of faith. When offering comfort to those suffering from emotional pain, remember that many times what appears to be a theological matter of the head is, in actuality, an emotional matter of the heart. You must have the

wisdom to know when to speak a word of truth to respond to a troubled mind and when to offer an act of love to respond to an aching heart.

If someone you care about is in emotional pain, view it as an opportunity for you to give them your full attention. Your friends who are in emotional distress do not need you to be concerned about them, they need you to be interested in them.

The emotional part of the brain is five times faster than the thinking part of the brain. This means you know what you feel before you can make rational sense out of it. Learning to respond to others with emotional intelligence (what we call E.Q.) is vital to being a loving friend to someone who is suffering. The qualities of E.Q. are self-awareness, self-regulation, empathy, and social skill.

Self-awareness means paying as much attention to your own feelings as to those of the one who is suffering. Your sadness affects the sadness of the other, your pain informs their pain, your defensiveness inhibits them, and your hope cannot help but inspire.

Self-regulation is the capacity to feel intense feelings but not needing to express them. You cannot choose your feelings (because your brain is wired to feel them before you even know it), but you can choose your behavior. Being able to regulate your emotional response is the sign of a mature friend.

Empathy is the capacity for deep understanding. It is different than sympathy. You do not have to feel what others feel to be helpful, but you do have to be able to understand what they feel to be of any use to them. This is not an intellectual understanding of the head, but an emotional knowing of the heart. Listen for the feelings between the lines.

Social skill is the ability to be intelligent not just about relationships but in them. You must be a vulnerable participant in relationships to aid in the healing process and not merely be a knowledgeable observer.

Similar to the importance of recognizing the difference between emotional and physical pain is the importance of knowing the difference between patience and perseverance. Patience is the virtue of being able to wait on God. Your ability to wait with a friend who is suffering for as long as it takes for God to act is a valuable gift to offer those who are in need. Perseverance is also very important, but it is very different. Perseverance is not about waiting but about taking action. Perseverance is the ability to choose the good in the midst of suffering. Perseverance is partnering with God and doing good—not in spite of suffering but because of it. This is not denial of pain; this is acknowledging pain and making the decision to act without letting it stop you. And what is the result? Even though you are helping others, it is actually you who will be a better person for having persevered with a family affected by disability (James 1:2–4).

## **A Disability Is Not Necessarily a Limitation**

Not everyone is traumatized by disability. Childhood experiences, temperament, and a loving community can mitigate the effects of disability in mighty ways. To comfort those with lifelong disabilities, you must come to understand what the disability means to them. To some, a disability does not mean a limitation at all. You can tell that this is what Australian evangelist Nick Vujicic meant when he said, “I am not disabled. I’m just a guy with no arms or legs.” If you are truly a loving friend to a person affected by disability, you will put in the hard work so you can view their condition in the same way that they do and treat them accordingly.

Even if someone has lost the power to control almost everything they could do physically, they still have the ability to inspire others spiritually. When it comes to human relationships, spiritual authority is always more powerful than physical control. Do not view those with visible physical disabilities as powerless because spiritual authority always empowers from within. You may be attempting to be a friend to someone affected by disability that is actually a very powerful person spiritually. Keep this in mind.

Families that have members who were born with disabilities experience the slow suffering that lasts a lifetime. As you get to know a person with disabilities and their family, it is good to remember that people who are different often want to be treated as ordinary. Psychological research has found that people habituate

to their disabilities, which means that someone who has had a disability for a long time can adjust to their limitations and achieve the same degree of happiness that others achieve who have never had disabilities. Families affected by disability can and do adjust to a new normal, and they most want to be viewed as just another family with real, but not extraordinary, struggles—just like every other family.

## Good Communication

Disability often catches families off guard. Without warning, shattered expectations and phantom pains become constant and unwanted companions. To further complicate matters, explaining this pain and disability to others can itself be a painful experience. Psychologists counsel families in these situations to keep no secrets in their immediate family. Sometimes we try to protect the ones we love from bad news, but when a life-changing disease or injury comes upon us, it is better to be open with those we love.

However, when it comes to discussing a disease or injury with people outside of the immediate family, families affected by disability must choose their confidants wisely. Often, they will have a select group of friends and relatives they can confide in, but generally they will not share everything they are going through with everyone who asks. This is because the reactions they get from others can place an additional burden upon the one who is suffering by making them feel responsible for the emotions of those who are upset by the news. Because of this, wisdom is required to know whom to confide in. If you become a confidant to a person with a disability and their family, be respectful of that trust they have placed in you. Remember to listen and respect their confidence, and take great care when discussing their experiences with others. If they ask you not to share those experiences, respect their wishes. Being ready and willing to help can also build trust. The ones suffering need to receive care, and those surrounding them need to give it—that includes you!

## Partnering with God

Ultimately, being a loving friend to a person who is suffering is partnering with God. God seeks to vertically reconcile hearts to himself. A loving friend should seek to horizontally reconcile hearts to each other. Extreme emotional pain causes us to feel alone and to seek self-preservation. This starves us from the very source of health, which is relationship with God and each other. A true friend seeks to step into the real pain of life, be with others in it, find God there, and connect the suffering hearts to theirs. The goal is not to correct but to connect. It is in the connection of our hearts to the hearts of those who suffer that we can offer emotional comfort. It is not something you do but something you witness God doing when you choose to be a friend to someone affected by disability.

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## About the Author

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