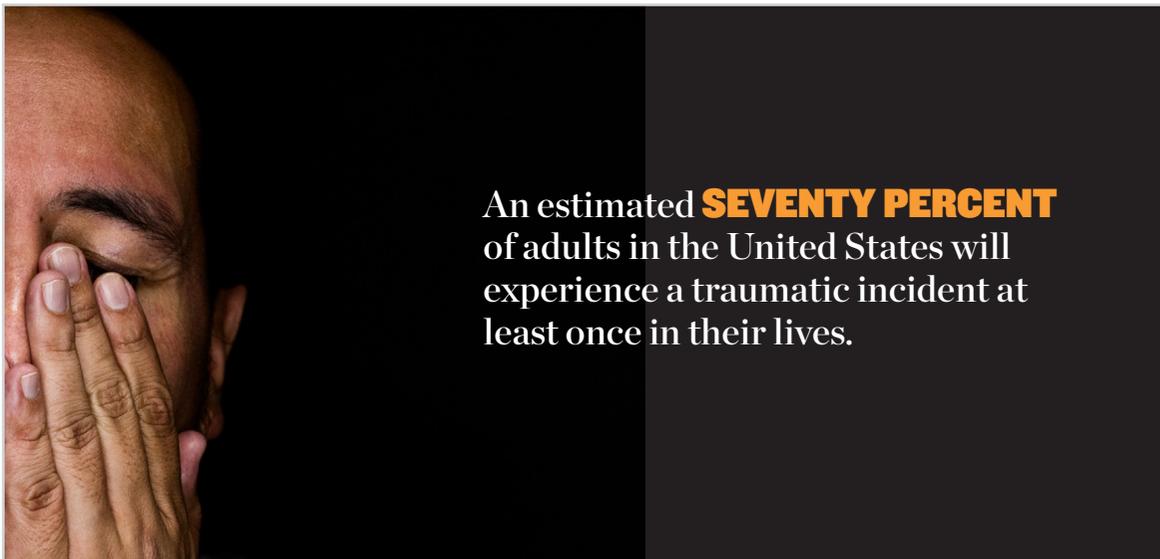


HELP FOR THE HURTING

What to do and say when it matters most.

By Mark Worthington



An estimated **SEVENTY PERCENT** of adults in the United States will experience a traumatic incident at least once in their lives.

Just two months after my wife and I were married, we were traveling over the Blue Mountains in Oregon one night shortly after midnight. We had noticed snow on the side of the road, but the freeway looked clear and vehicles were moving along at the posted speed. Suddenly our Volkswagen hit a patch of ice. We spun out of control, flew off into the median, flipped over, and bounced three times before coming to a stop. A truck driver coming in our direction at the time said our car went up and down like a rubber ball. He was certain no one could have survived such a crash.

Miraculously, we did. However, my wife was covered with blood from facial and head injuries. I was unconscious for a short time, and when I came to, I was not able to move my hands. Later we learned that I had flown up and hit the metal sunroof, bending it back and crushing two vertebrae in my neck.

We were twenty-five miles from the nearest hospital, and once we had been loaded into the ambulance that came to the scene, we had to travel slowly because of the ice. It was a long twenty-five miles! The pain and trauma made it impossible for us to think rationally, and I kept asking over and over why this had happened. After all, just hours before, we had held hands in a circle of our friends and prayed for safe travel.

Thankfully, the medic in the ambulance was a Christian. I do not remember all he said and did to calm us, but I will never forget his comforting presence. And he was just the first of many individuals who ministered to us over the next few months as we slowly recuperated. The words of encouragement and acts of love we received were a tremendous help during our recovery.

Our firsthand experience of Christian support in a time of crisis has had a spiritual impact on me. Slowly, the answer to the question “why?” that had



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repeatedly gone through my mind during our ambulance ride began to emerge. Who can offer comfort and support better than one who has experienced a need for comfort and support? God wants us to reach out to those who are in distress. He wants us to be His hands and feet, both to a lost and dying world, and to those in our Christian family. Along with that understanding came a desire to prepare myself to help others in their times of need.

An estimated seventy percent of adults in the United States will experience a traumatic incident at least once in their lives. That fact means that even if we are never personally involved in such an occurrence, most of us will have someone in our circle of acquaintances who has been. Scripture indicates that all people, including Christians, will face adversity. When people encounter times of crisis, they need comfort and the reassurance that God is mindful of their needs. And for that reason, such times offer us a unique opportunity to reach out with care and compassion.

Jesus commended those who minister to others in trying circumstances saying, "I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me." When His hearers asked when they had done those deeds, He explained, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matthew 25:35-36, 40).

In Luke 10:29-37, after Jesus stated that we should love our neighbor as ourselves, He told the parable of the Good Samaritan, describing a traveler who was ambushed by robbers and left by the roadside. Although other travelers passed by the injured man, the Good Samaritan stepped in and did what a Christian should do in such a situation: He provided assistance and comfort to the wounded man. Jesus concluded His parable by giving the command, "Go, and do thou likewise."

The Apostle Paul included caring for those in distress in his list of responsibilities Christians have toward one another, telling believers at Thessalonica to "comfort the

feeble-minded, [and] support the weak" (1 Thessalonians 5:14), and charging the elders at Ephesus, "I have shewed you all things, how that so labouring ye ought to support the weak" (Acts 20:35).

The first century church faced crisis after crisis, yet they risked their lives to meet as a group of believers to pray, break bread, and sing praises to God together. We know from Scripture that they also comforted and supported one another, and assisted those who had lost husbands, fathers, wives, and mothers through martyrdom or imprisonment, encouraging them to continue in the faith. The result was that in spite of strenuous efforts to stamp out Christianity and the martyrdom of thousands of believers, the message of Jesus Christ has lived on through the ages.

As Christians in our day, we too have both a responsibility and a great privilege to support, comfort, and encourage those who are suffering. However, at times we may be unsure about how to help. As a minister and pastor, I have dealt with a variety of crises over the years. I understand the feelings of uncertainty that can arise, and the fear that we lack the ability or training to respond effectively. In such times, it is easy to hesitate out of concern that we might say something wrong or inadvertently add to the individual's distress.

Following are some suggestions that can help all of us when someone we know experiences a crisis.

PRAY.

The most important help we can offer those in trying circumstances is prayer. Though our schedules may be busy and our abilities limited in terms of direct assistance, we should never be too busy to pray for those who are suffering.

MAKE CONTACT.

Call, email, send a note, or offer to visit. People in crisis often feel isolated and unsure if others care. John 13:35 tells us, "By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another," and making the effort to reach out is one way we can show love.

LISTEN.

For some, describing the crisis situation can be a first step toward coping

with it. We can show concern and understanding by repeating the sequence of events and asking for clarification when needed.

COMMUNICATE WITH SENSITIVITY.

Ask God for help in correctly assessing the physical and emotional state of the individual, and in adapting the tone and substance of conversation to verbal and nonverbal cues. King Solomon observed, "Pleasant words are as an honeycomb, sweet to the soul, and health to the bones" (Proverbs 16:24). We should be cautious about verbalizing our personal perspective about the situation, and keep in mind that statements such as, "I know how you feel," may not be helpful. When people are reeling from their own feelings, they think that others can't possibly understand their experience unless they actually have been there. It is also best to avoid offering overly optimistic comments or minimizing the individual's problems.

BE PREPARED FOR EMOTIONAL FRAGILITY.

Unexpected trauma can cause unusual responses. Illness, pain, and medications, as well as stress and uncertainty, can impact a person's emotions. Normal coping mechanisms may have shut down, and your friend may feel numb, intensely emotional, or anywhere in between. Tears may be close to the surface. Be empathetic, and do not be afraid to show your own emotion. Remember, the Apostle Paul told us to "weep with them that weep" (Romans 12:15).

RESPECT CONFIDENTIALITY.

Be cautious about sharing specifics related to the situation without permission from the people involved. For the most part, it is their right and responsibility to share information as they deem best. Quoting Solomon again, "He that refraineth his lips is wise" (Proverbs 10:19).

ASK HOW YOU CAN HELP.

Let the person know you would be happy to help in any way feasible. Suggest tasks you might take on such as making calls or doing errands. Take care of practical details as you are able, especially if the individual and close family members are having difficulty coping or knowing what to do next. This may mean a sacrifice of personal time or resources, "but to do good and to communicate forget not: for with such sacrifices God is well pleased" (Hebrews 13:16).

QUIETLY ASSESS UNSPOKEN NEEDS.

If the individual in need is elderly, has small children, or other circumstances exist that limit their ability to function, consider ways the extended church family might be able to offer assistance. (We see in Acts 6 that the Early Church set the example in this.) Perhaps you could arrange for a group of fellow Christians to step in and help make meals, provide childcare, take the person to appointments, etc.

RECOGNIZE LIMITATIONS.

Some people will need help we cannot provide, such as ongoing financial support, social services, or counseling. Though we can and

should do our best to point them to appropriate resources, we must not feel guilty or pressured if we are unable to go beyond that.

BE PATIENT.

The life and emotional landscape of one who has undergone a crisis event may have changed drastically. We may wish that he or she would "move on," but everyone's recovery process is unique. Our role is simply to do our best to support, comfort, and encourage them as they adjust, knowing that "weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning" (Psalm 30:5).

The truth is that what hurting individuals need most is the understanding that God is there with them in their time of need, and that He will see them through. As we reach out with solace and support, we offer those in crisis a glimpse of the goodness of God. We become tangible reminders of His love for them, His care for every aspect of their lives, and His unchanging character.

It is a privilege to make ourselves available when crisis comes, and the encouragement we offer by pointing hurting individuals to the One who has already "borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows" (Isaiah 53:4) will not only be a blessing to those needing support, but also a blessing to us! ■

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I am thankful that I am saved, that Jesus is in my heart. I had the privilege to be raised in a home where I knew what it took to be saved. I was taught the Gospel my whole life, and what was preached at church was lived at home. It was easy when I was very young to get saved. I am thankful for that. That was a great starting point for the rest of my life, and as I got older, I continued with it, saying, "Yes, I want to stick with this."

Just a couple weeks ago on a Friday night, our eldest son came downstairs and said his younger brother wanted to get saved. He wanted all of us to come to his bedside. What a thrill it is to see the Gospel continuing to the next generation. I am so glad Jesus is in my heart. ■

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EVIDENCE