

Helping people through the grieving process
by David Gallagher



Perhaps nothing you do in your ministry is more important than personal contact with the people of your church during times of grief. While this can throw you into uncomfortable situations, it's also where you can make the most difference in people's lives. As a pastor, you'll inevitably face death in your ministry. You will be called upon to conduct funerals. Most people, including pastors, don't like to think or talk about dying. As a pastor, you must step out of your comfort zone and help people through the grieving process.

If you've been uncomfortable about being with people who are grieving, here are some practical suggestions to help you help someone through the grieving process:

1. Forget most of what you learned in seminary and be yourself. What would you want if you were going through a difficult time? Chances are that those you minister to and with would like the same thing. When you are hurting, you certainly do not want someone preaching to you or quoting Bible verses.

When my father was critically ill, I was so thankful that a close friend of mine (who was in seminary) was there in the hospital room with me. My friend stood there with me at the bedside in the hospital room, but he remained totally quiet. After my father passed away, the two of us left the hospital room. My friend didn't say a word. We walked down the long hospital corridor; yet he didn't say a word. We stepped into the elevator in complete silence. Not one word was spoken even during the long walk out of the lobby across the parking lot to the car. My friend's arm was around me; I had just lost my father and no words would be appropriate. When we reached the car, the first words were spoken. I looked into the eyes of my friend and quietly whispered, "Thank you, my friend."

2. It's not about you or your agenda. I have learned something about clergy. Too often clergy are more interested in conversation and conversion than they are in comfort! We have a message to present to those in need. But often we present that message inappropriately or at the wrong time. Remember that when you are with someone who is grieving, it's not about you, it's about them. This is not your time; it's their time, their moment, their crisis, and the best thing we can ever do at that moment is be quiet and be compassionate.

David Gallagher's favorite books on grief

- *Healing Takes Time* by Dave Gallagher (Liturgical Press, 2005)

- *Good Grief* by Granger Westberg (Augsburg Press, 2004)
- *The Gift of Significance* by Doug Manning (In-Sight Books, Inc., 1992)
- *What To Do When a Loved One Dies* by Eva Shaw (Dickens Press, 1994)
- *Death and the Life After* by Billy Graham (W Publishing, 1994)
- *Christian Caregiving a Way of Life* by Kenneth Haugk (Augsburg, 1984)

When someone comes to my office for counseling, I sit for 45 minutes basically listening. At the end of the session they usually stand up and say, "Pastor, you have helped me so much." Oh, occasionally, I ask a good question and then sit back and listen for five or 10 minutes. I may even give a nod, tip my head, or scoot my chair a little closer so we are knee to knee for a good cry, but I'm the listener not the talker in most instances. God uses those times of listening and asking a few questions to allow the grieving person to cry and unscramble their feelings to make a bit of sense in their life. Remember that it hurts so much to talk and to remember, but it hurts more to remember and not talk.

3. Understand some of the misunderstandings about grief.

One misunderstanding is that we think it hurts too much to remember a painful experience. In so thinking, we try to cover up the reality of the loss. Grief is not a process of forgetting and moving on. Grief is a process of learning to cope while we remember!

Pastors have been taught to give answers. We have huge libraries and stand in front of groups of people using PowerPoint presentations and often quoting from memory theological theories and Bible verses. But when it comes to helping someone through the grieving process, forget all that. Grief is the friend that brings healing. Grief is the positive force that brings the healing. Grief is not something to be feared and avoided. We also need to understand the misunderstanding about sympathy. We may think that sympathy makes it worse – it doesn't. I try to encourage people to understand that loss, and death in particular, is better understood as a transition. When we realize that life is limited, we can get on with living to the maximum.

4. Check your own attitudes, feelings, and emotions. We must learn to be sensitive to the Spirit's leading. We must allow people time to deal with their feelings. We must allow those who are grieving to talk about their feelings and then provide them with some helpful resources. Here are some resources that I have found very helpful:

- *I Will trust God*, by Paul F. Keller (Kairos: 1984)
- *CareNotes* (Abbey Press: 1990)
- *Scriptographic Booklets* (Channing L. Bete Co., Inc.: 1976)
- *Feeling the Good in Grief* (American Tract Society: 1992)
- *How Can I Live with My Loss?* (RBC Ministries: 1992)

5. Let Scripture and the Holy Spirit empower you. Scriptures like Psalm 139:6-12, Matthew 5:3-8, or 1 Corinthians 15:20-26. An excellent book that is highly practical and filled with encouraging Scriptures is written by Warren and David Wiersbe, *Ministering to the Mourning* (Moody Publishers: 2006). Another practical book that may be very helpful is by Neville A. Kirkwood, *Pastoral Care in Hospitals* (Morehouse Publishing: 2005).

6. Offer grief support. Experiencing loss offers a choice. We may choose to become a bitter person or we may choose to become a better person. That's where grief support groups can be

extremely helpful. One of the first reactions people have as they experience loss is to pull inside and close others out. That's the worse thing that can happen, and that's one good reason to have solid grief support resources and groups available. That's also why I wrote a little book titled *Healing Takes Time*. The book is intended to give encouragement and strength over a period of time. It may be a good resource for a grief support group.