

Christmas Mourning

by Rev. James Sudbrock

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Christmas should be special and exciting. A time for family and friends. A time for loving, sharing and relaxing. And a time for giving and receiving as we celebrate our Savior's birth in worship, at parties and with gifts. But for some, the holidays are a time of sadness and loneliness, especially if they are mourning the passing of a loved one.

Eventually, all of us will grieve the loss of a loved one. Grief is one of life's most painful experiences. But there are things we can do to cope with our loss, and ways we can help others get through their own sorrow.

One thing to remember is that there are no rules when it comes to grief. For awhile, there was the perception that everybody grieved the same way. Each person is unique in every other way, so each person goes through the grieving process in an individual way, too.

Some people deal with a loved one's death by focusing on feelings. They often can benefit from a support group or counseling.

Others may feel more comfortable acting on their grief than talking about it. They may start raising funds for a foundation that is working to cure the disease that their loved one had, for example.

People also have to realize that their reactions aren't right or wrong. They have to let themselves react naturally. Some may worry that they're not crying enough or that they're grieving too long.

Some may fall into a deep, long-lasting depression after the death of a loved one. In these cases, counseling is strongly recommended; clinical depression is a serious disorder that requires professional help.

Others may be disturbed by feelings of anger. That's one that people really don't know how to deal with. They may feel anger towards the person who has died, because the person has abandoned them. Then they may feel guilty.

Anger is a perfectly natural reaction, especially if the person left behind still had something to resolve with the deceased person. That's often where counseling can be helpful, to help one find a way of dealing with those unresolved issues.

In 1 Corinthians 15, the apostle Paul expresses his frustration with death and the cause of death—sin. But rather than dwelling on sin and death, Paul turns our attention to God's sure blessings of forgiveness and new life through Jesus Christ. In the baby

Jesus, comfort and peace receive new birth. Born of earth, Jesus bears our woes. Born of heaven, His infant hands break the grip of sin and death. He gives us new life.

Being a Christian friend

For those who are sad, but not clinically depressed, a friend's listening ear is often helpful. Friends and other family members play a key role in helping people cope with grief.

Don't be afraid of "bothering" a friend who is grieving. Err on the side of reaching out rather than saying, "Well, if he needs me, he'll know I'm always here." Maybe they don't know you're always there for them.

Friends also need to realize that the grieving process usually takes a long time. One of the problems a grieving person has is that the people around you very quickly tire of it.

Also, friends and coworkers may be reluctant to bring up the name of the deceased, lest they hurt the feelings of the grieving. But people who are grieving sometimes feel that their circle is trying to pretend that their loved one who is gone never existed. It's not unhealthy to want to remember a person and to talk about the person.

Another way that friends can help people cope with grief is to include them in activities they enjoyed before their loss. If the deceased person was a spouse, for example, keep inviting the living spouse over for dinner, just as you did before the person died. The grieving person needs to know that you still love him or her even without the other person.

You may feel you lack the patience or ability to wipe tears of grief from the face of your hurting friend. You may be right! But the infant face and tiny fingers of the Christ child are filled with comfort and encouragement for you both. The Savior will draw the two of you together. He will fill your heart with patience and your mouth with heaven-sent encouragement for your friend (1 Thess. 5:9-11).

TIPS TO HELP SOMEONE DEAL WITH GRIEF

1. Pray for comfort and strength for your friend, and for God's guidance and wisdom for yourself.
2. Everyone grieves differently. Allow them to go through their own grief cycle without putting a timeline on it.
3. Realize that this Christmas may be difficult for your friend, but don't pretend as if nothing has happened.
4. Encourage your friend or loved one to seek out Christian support groups or Christian counseling to help cope with feelings of depression and loss. Even feelings of anger are natural and should be expressed or worked out in counseling or support groups.

5. Help the individual plan for and get involved with activities when they seem ready. This could simply be dinner at your house, involvement in church activities and services, or outside events such as sports, concerts or charities. Be flexible and patient. Allow your friend to back out of or change plans.
6. Be a good listener. Often just lending an ear is enough to get someone through the grieving process.
7. Some people dealing with the death of a loved one find comfort in holiday traditions; others find them painful reminders. Be aware of and sensitive to your friend's feelings and limitations.

Highlighted through it all, are the hopeful words of the angels to the lowly shepherds, that first Christmas morning:

"Fear not: for behold I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior which is Christ the Lord."

Children grieve too

That same kind of sensitivity is useful when helping children deal with the death of someone close to them. An hour-long conversation about what happened to Grandma is probably out of the question with young children. But, parents should be alert for cues that children want to talk.

For young children, a death in the family may be their first experience with bad things that happen in the world. It's important for parents to let their kids know at such times that they will always stand by them, no matter what happens. A lot of assurance has to take place.

If possible, the child should participate in the funeral and perhaps see the deceased. Those kinds of things help a child understand that the person has indeed died.

For both children and adults, don't use the platitudes that often come up at a time like this, such as "He's in a better place now" or "God took Grandma away."

In particular, people should avoid asking, "How old was he?" Such a question implies that it's somehow not as painful when older people pass on. The reaction to the question from your grieving friend is likely to be, "I don't care if he was 99, he was still my father!"

In the end, coping with grief or helping another person cope all comes down to normal human interaction. Trust your instincts, reach out to help or to get help, and don't put grief on a timetable.

This Christmas season, the gentle hand of the baby Jesus reaches out to you and your loved ones. Those hands crafted human life at the beginning (Gen. 2:7). At the cross, those hands carried the burden of your sin and the sins of those you love (Luke 24:39). In the end, He will take you by the hand and lead you into the fullness of His joy and peace.

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