

Written by Chariti Kupiec. Please do not copy, change, edit, or distribute without permission.

## Walking Alongside Grieving Parents Written by: Chariti Kupiec

Most of us that have children have fleeting thoughts of what we think we would do or not do if something ever happened to them. It's unimaginable and we believe we could never survive. We find ourselves uncomfortable with the thought of that level of suffering and so we leave it and store it away praying we never think of it again. And then we get a call. A call that someone we know and love, someone we go to church with, or maybe work with has suffered that tragedy, their child has died. In our pain, our discomfort with suffering, our wrestling with God, we must now face what we previously could tuck away and begin walking with someone through the unimaginable.

The first thought we usually have is, "I have no idea what to do or say!" I want to equip you. I know your heart is to love and serve and I want to shore you up to do that in a way that blesses the parents and allows them the space to grieve. The following tips come not only from my personal experience of losing a child, but also my experience ministering and loving families that suffered the same.

Our number one goal in the immediate moments after is to LOVE the family. It's to love with absolute abandon, to pray without ceasing, to align with our hurting friends and cry out for comfort for them. It isn't to have the right words or do the right thing, just show up! Showing up isn't always in person, we'll get to that, but truly showing up on their behalf before God.

Christ tells us in John 15:12 that we are to LOVE the way He loves us – "This is My commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."

How can we do that? Paul lays the foundation for us in 1 Corinthians 13:4-7

Love suffers long and is kind; love does not envy; love does not parade itself, is not puffed up; does not behave rudely, does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil; does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth; bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

**Love is kind - Meet real needs to show them the *kindness* of God.** This looks different depending on the situation but in general:

### Need one – People

1. **Pastoral Care** – they'll want a Pastor or their small group leader or an elder with them immediately. This is a massive crisis of faith, even for the strongest believers. They need to know they are not alone. Beware, this isn't the time to preach, it's the time to weep and mourn with them and just continue to reassure them they are loved by you, the church, and by God. He has not forsaken nor abandoned them.
2. **Closest friends & immediate family** – these first few days is not the time for the entire body or circle of friends to see them. It is the time for their "people" their close friends, immediate family, small group. \*Protect them\* I'm not sure why, but people come from everywhere and it's overwhelming. There is a time for a larger community, just not until after the funeral at

minimum. Your job as their inner circle is full on support. You're going to walk out the details with them -

- a. In the event of an accidental death there will be an interview with CPS, police, or both. They won't want to do this alone. We found that we were already struggling with personal blame and responsibility in our heads and this just seemed to solidify that.
  - b. There will be an autopsy, assure them this is normal. Let's be real, nothing about it feels normal or okay and it's a terrible reality when it's your baby.
  - c. Leaving the hospital is awful. Be there if possible. They don't want to leave, it feels like you're abandoning your child or like walking away from all you've known.
  - d. They'll feel a total loss of control and that's incredibly hard. Up to this point, they've been fully responsible and aware of their child 24/7 since birth. Acknowledge this loss of control and mourn with them.
  - e. They probably won't eat for a few days. Don't harp on this, their body is in overdrive handling the level of anxiety, there's really no way they could eat. Or maybe they will but either way who cares? It'll happen in time.
3. **Decision makers** – depending on their level of family involvement or proximity, they may need help making decisions. Some things they will be deciding:
- a. Organ donation – this has to be something they choose, just talk through the options. For us, it was life giving to know we could help other children. It has not been that way for everyone though so don't pressure them either way.
  - b. Factor in the autopsy and release when planning services, there's usually a 2-3 day lag time.
  - c. Funeral home – choose a place that is central to their life so they can travel back and forth easily as they make arrangements, sign paperwork, etc.
  - d. Funeral costs – They may need help with this and one person communicating with them feels less invasive than many
  - e. Funeral arrangements – there are so many details. If they have and/or are close to their parents, they will be the key figures in helping with this. If not, you'll fill that role. (see notes on funeral for details)
  - f. Burial plot – near home or not on their daily path?
4. **Point Person** – they'll need someone that can coordinate their needs and service opportunities. They can't begin to wrap their brains around what they'll need so an organizer is a blessing! There is a period of time where I forgot how to be human. I didn't have the capacity to worry if my lawn was mowed and it was a gift to just have that stuff done. Some suggestions:
- a. A meal at the church after the funeral service
  - b. Meals for the next 2-3 months
    - i. Have another meal delivery point person. One person that receives the meals and gets them to the family. It's incredibly difficult to see new people daily. They may have days they don't even know if they brushed their teeth. Allow them the freedom to not have to be "on"
  - c. Groceries (think easy lunches and dinners, paper goods, toiletries, etc.)
  - d. House cleaning (be sure to stay away from the deceased child's room and laundry)
  - e. Lawn care
  - f. Pet care

### Need Two - The funeral

These are just some suggestions and things to be thinking of –

1. Protect them. They'll want to see people but there are appropriate and inappropriate times. Be their voice. We had people that wanted to come in the back to the family room. The 2<sup>nd</sup> worst moment of my life was about to happen, my final goodbye, and while well meaning, I didn't want to take that very moment to visit.
2. They'll usually want a video of either their home movies or slides of their pictures or both.  
Example - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uFf0ZCXHLik>
3. Blow up pictures for display
4. We had a book for people to write down memories that I cherish to this day
5. I suggest donations to a good cause or to help with the arrangements in lieu of flowers. We had so many plants. and they all died and I grieved every single one.
6. We released balloons with a note for prayer in them
7. Feed the masses so they can keep people from coming to their house
  - a. This requires a big mobilization of the body – I would think it would be appropriate to include this in group training.
8. Show up even if you didn't really know them or weren't close. They need to see and feel that people are supporting them.

### **Love does not envy –**

You must not envy the people surrounding the grieving parents. We honor their relationships and understand that we still have the same relationship as we had before. We may FEEL very close to the parent because we see them often at church or work or school, but we understand that we all have our inner circle and that's what they need right now. Their immediate family, best friends, and small group. There will be time down the road for a coffee date or whatever for those that love them but truly are a small part of their life. It's absolutely appropriate to write her a card, send a note, etc. If you are a friend and it grieves you to not be there for them in that moment, you can shoot a text worded something like, "I love you and am praying for you and your family. I want you to know that I am not running from your pain but want to give you a chance to walk this with those in your inner circle. I will check back with you after the funeral and see if you might like for me to bring coffee or lunch by. In the meantime, you are in my thoughts and prayers." This allows you to express your desire to be there for them but to not intrude unless invited. This isn't about you right now, be unoffendable and *know your role*.

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### **Love does not parade itself, is not puffed up –**

This is a GREAT time for us to serve without any need or desire to be noticed. There is usually a point person organizing meals for the service and then later for the family. It is a relief for meals to be normalcy. There are days when they just can't. They can't smile and entertain or cry with you. What a gift you'll be giving to drop the meal with the point people and include a sweet note for them.

### **Love does not behave rudely –**

Oh, the things people say in their effort to love the hurting parents. You mean well, you really do, but your words are so hurtful. Silence can be your friend – don't try to find perfect words to say because they don't exist; you can communicate that you love and are praying for the family and that is perfect.

Some of these aren't necessarily rude, they're just hard to navigate for the parent. Here are some examples of what not to say:

1. **I'm sorry.** They'll hear this 5 million times. Saying "I'm sorry" elicits a natural response to tell you it's okay, and it's not okay. A better thing to say might be something along the lines of "I know your heart is broken. I care about you and will be here for you as you walk this road."
2. **How can I help?** They have no idea. They're totally unaware of what they need or may need. Think of ways you can help and state it something like, "I'd like to help you by making a quilt of his clothes when you're ready. If that sounds good to you but you're not ready now, I'll check back in a few months and we can do it whenever you choose"
3. **The awkward introductions.** Under no circumstances should they be introduced as the couple that lost their child. It's weird and awkward and a notoriety that you don't want. It's like you're suddenly famous, but not for saving the President or something amazing, but for the absolute worst day of your life. Terrible.

Cliché phrases that we use to spin it to seem positive -

1. **The spiritual statement.**
  - a. Take comfort, he's in a better place now. I know he is but right now that's not comforting to me at all. I want him here where I can hold him, smell him, hear his laugh. There will be time for me to work through all the spiritual issues and I AM grateful to have hope and I AM grateful that at least if he's not with me, he's in heaven. But I still don't choose that. Let it be okay for me to express that. Even Paul expressed to the Corinthians the depth of his suffering, that it was beyond what he could bear apart from Christ. "For we do not want you to be ignorant, brethren, of our trouble which came to us in Asia: that we were *burdened beyond measure, above strength, so that we despaired even in life.*" 2 Corinthians 1:8

- b. **God doesn't give you more than you can handle** – so unbiblical. God says over and over WHEN you walk through the fire, the water, tribulation, suffering, HE will be there. That clearly says that we'll go through more than we can handle on our own and we will need Him and the power of the Holy Spirit!
- c. **The "at least" statements.** At least you're pregnant / can have more children / already have other children, etc. – The child they've lost is a unique human being created by God as an individual, loved and cherished by their parent. They cannot be replaced. There is no child that can fill the void.

Really, any sentence that starts with "at least" should be immediately stopped.

- d. **The "I can relate" statement.** I know how you feel, my Mom, Dad, dog, sibling, etc. died. No, you don't know how they feel. At all. Unless you've lost a child, you can't relate. And even then, every story is a person and you didn't love that child, they did. Imagine how you would feel if it was your child, now multiply that times a million, and you still can't imagine the depth of pain. And that's okay. They don't need you to relate to them to try to feel better, they need you just to love them. *You can minister and love them effectively without having walked in their shoes.* Someone \*literally\* told me they knew how I felt because their dog had just died.
- e. **The "you're so strong" statement.** You're so strong, I could NEVER make it if I lost my child. Yes, you could because you would have to. It insinuates that I'm somehow colder or less loving than you because if it happened to you, your love is so much more that it would kill you. Friend, I thought the same. I just didn't have a choice.

### **Love does not seek its own, is not provoked, thinks no evil -**

This is a hard one for me to address and I pray you'll hear my heart, it is truly a desire to help you have the right perspective. *Don't make this about you.* Don't take up an offense because you can't push through to the family. Don't decide you are a great counselor and they need your help and wisdom. Don't look at them and cry when they show up somewhere and then rush to embrace them and hope for a moment between the two of you. Don't make them comfort you, It's such a burden. They're broken in a million tiny pieces right now. They will literally NEVER be the same person again, and them trying to make you feel better or meet your needs or cry with you so that you feel you've had a moment with them saps any life they may have out of them.

Allow them the space to be themselves and not how you would do it or your way. Don't judge them for how they grieve. They may show up the next week unexpectedly because they crave some normalcy or routine. Don't say, "I can't believe you're here" or "You should or shouldn't" and then fill in the blank. You don't know. You don't have the best right answer and it's not your place to decide if how they are choosing to proceed is "healthy" or not. On that note, don't use that word...HEALTHY. "Is that really a healthy response?" Good grief, we're just trying to figure this out and that makes us feel analyzed and judged.

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Refrain from talking about their “healing” as if It’s a place to arrive to. Healing is not a destination, it’s an ongoing process with the Lord. He peels back layer upon layer of our hurt and brings His healing salve in His timing and the timing they allow. I’m seventeen years down the road as of this writing and God is still bringing about truth, love, and restoration.

Be REAL. don’t walk on eggshells around them. They’re hurting but they’re not incapable of normal human interaction.

### **Love does not rejoice in iniquity, but rejoices in the truth –**

Rejoices in truth. This is HUGE. They don’t need opinions, they need Biblical truth. And that will come from their time with the Lord in the Word and prayer. From sermons and studies. From their Pastor, spouse, group leader, etc. If they were to reach out to you confused, it would be appropriate to have conversations with them but otherwise, they will get what they need. You don’t need to give them the right biblical answers so relieve yourself of that burden. They need to be loved! A Biblical view on suffering in light of their deep pain will take time. One tip I do have is to surround them with solid people. Pray against false doctrine and lies, it starts right away.

Some things people say that are unsound:

- 1) **He’s an angel now.** No, he’s not. The word tells us that angels were created by God (Ps. 148:2, 5) to care for God’s people (Ps 91:11-12; Heb 1:14) and to guide and instruct people (Gen 24:7, 40; Ex 14:19) They rejoiced in the creation of the world (Job 38:7). They are clearly a separate creation from man.
- 2) **It’s because of YOUR sin that he died.** Oh, this is the most painful one and it really is said. Yes, death is a result of the fall of man and our sin. Individual, corporate, all of it. It’s true. And that can be said generally and should be said. God is the author of life, He is grieving with you, etc. There is time to reconcile that in the weeks and months and years to come. But not right after. You already feel personally responsible like if you would have not done this or gone here or done that, it wouldn’t have happened. But God is sovereign. All powerful, all knowing, all loving, all kind, full of grace & mercy. When this happens we question all of that at some point. Why? Why my child? Did I do something to deserve this? Ultimately the question is why not? Every single day is a gift. We deserve nothing but receive all because of who He is. But there is no way to work through all that while in the midst of intense grief. Survive. Depend on Him for comfort. Survive.
- 3) **God must have needed him.** God is the creator and sustainer of the universe. God is changeless, all powerful (omnipotent), all knowing (omniscient), everywhere (omnipresent), transcendent, & eternal and those are only His natural attributes, not even His moral attributes. He doesn’t “need” any of us to accomplish His will.
- 4) **You must be special.** God must be allowing you walk through this because you are special, strong, etc. He knew you could handle it. Well, that’s a kind of special I’ll skip if that’s alright with you. The rationalization that the death of a child can somehow mean you’re “chosen” is a way for that person to feel better. The discomfort of someone’s suffering makes us want an answer. Stop it.

- 5) **Refrain from trying to answer “why”.** I’m not exactly sure where this question comes from but from the moments in the hospital forward, there’s an underlying desire and need to just have an answer. Some parents feel there would be some relief if they had one. I have found this isn’t true. **What answer would ever make it okay?** One thing I’ve learned, over time, is that our eternal good and our earthly good are sometimes two very different things. NOW, seventeen years later, I can lovingly recount the goodness of God through this. The things He’s redeemed, the beauty from ashes, the lives changed, all of it. But my Mommy flesh could still never choose it. That’s why we are not God and He is. When we are looking to “justify” our suffering it’s an attempt to *be* God. We feel we know what would be better. Surely, my child NOT dying would be better for me. I get it and the struggle is real. But God’s word is clear – our thoughts are not His thoughts, our ways are not His ways, and in such a real and tangible way, over time, He works ALL things, even the tragic things, together for the good of those who love Him. There is

### Truth in action - A Biblical approach

I’ve spent some time telling you what NOT to say. Let me help you with what is true and good and right

1. **God’s Word is TRUE.** All of it, all the parts. It is a daily decision to know that even though you may not *feel* like all you know is true, you will believe God’s word. I call this the fake it until you make it approach. I CLUNG to the truth of the Word even in the darkest moments. My biggest prayer was, “God, I am not believing this right now, help my unbelief.”
2. **God’s love is never wavering.** They are not being punished. Christ gave His life to cover our sin, it is finished once and for all. The Bible is one of the greatest love stories ever written. I can’t reference every verse but here are a few as a reminder
  - a. John 3:16 – For God SO loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believe in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.
  - b. 1 John 4:10 – In this love, not that we loved God, but that He loved us and sent His Son to be the propitiation for our sins.
  - c. Mark 10:45 – For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.
  - d. 1 Peter 3:18 - For Christ also suffered once for sins, the just and unjust, that He might bring us to God.

Love is an essential part of God’s nature. God IS love, the Bible declares -1 John 4:8-16, His love surpasses our understanding – Eph. 3:19, It’s everlasting – Jer. 31:3, it’s free – Hos. 14:4, sacrificial – John 3:16, and enduring to the end – John 13:1.

3. **Nothing can separate us from His love.** You can *feel* cutoff from God in moments like these. Where IS He? The enemy would have us sit in that and our thinking can spiral out of control. The good news of the Gospel reigns. We are HIS and nothing changes that. See Romans 8:38-39
4. **He is with us through the suffering.** We are never promised a life free from suffering. In fact, we are told that we will suffer and walk through trials. Ps 23:4, Is 43:2

Truly, there’s SO MUCH more I could say here but in the effort of helping you with a quick reference guide, I’ll stop. This is a great start of just continually reminding them they have not been forsaken.

### **Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things –**

This is you, my friends. You will bear this with them, believe the truth of God's word and that He is who He says He is and He is GOOD. He has not forsaken or abandoned them. You will endure with them for the long haul, you won't forget their pain. Ever.

Here's how you'll walk that out:

1. **Commit to pray for them.** Right after Paul says to the Corinthians that his suffering was so great he didn't even want to live, he says in 2 Corinthians 1:11, "You also helping together in prayer for us, that thanks may be given by many person on our behalf for the gift granted to us through many." Essentially – We had no hope, but we trusted God, He delivered us, and we trusted you also to be praying for us and giving thanks on our behalf before the Lord. The Word is teaching us that we can't do it alone! We need people lifting us up and carrying our burdens in prayer. Decide, is it daily? Weekly? Monthly? Will you write it out to them in a note?
  - a. Every month for a year we received an anonymous card where someone was praying for us. The handwriting was always different so I knew it was a sign up kind of prayer commitment on our behalf. I can't express the peace and love I felt every time I received a card.
2. **Don't forget them.** It's over for everyone else after about 4-6 weeks but it's really just beginning for them. There are days that feel like pure hell on earth. Don't forget them. Every single decision is HUGE. Should I put his toys away? Pack his clothes? Should I take down pictures? What should I do with all his stuff? You grieve every, single thing. They need to know they have not been abandoned in their suffering. Send a note, make a phone call, be available.
3. **Say the child's name.** Say his name, talk about him, don't act like he didn't exist. Just be normal in your conversation the way you would've before. They'll appreciate that so much. \*If you had a personal relationship with the child a note with your memories would bless them. Our son had the same Sunday School teacher every week and she wrote a precious letter that I cherish and read when I am missing him.
4. **But, also, don't dwell on it.** Be available and don't forget them for sure, but don't dwell on it every time you talk to them either. It's their reality 24 hours a day, non-stop. When they see you they may crave some relief from it all, even just for a moment. Just ACT NORMAL. And laugh. It's okay to laugh.
5. **Remember the Grandparents.** They're grieving the loss of their grandchild, watching their child suffer beyond belief and have no way to ease it, and grieving the way their family life has become. No holiday or birthday is the same for quite some time. Pray for them, send them a note, acknowledge their pain.
6. **Invite them out.** Take them to coffee, have them over for dinner, play games, see a movie, meet at the park for play dates. They need a break from the oppressiveness, it just sucks all the time.