

## HOW TO HELP IN TIMES OF LOSS OR SERIOUS ILLNESS

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As one whose job it is to visit with patients who are seriously or terminally ill, there are a number of things I have learned about human interactions in these situations that can be helpful to friends and family.

First, be aware of appropriate emotional boundaries. To be truly helpful to someone who has suffered a loss or is seriously ill, one must receive permission to enter their private, emotional "space." In my chaplain role, I often find myself introduced to an ill person by a family member, doctor, or nurse and asked to "help." Even if I have been given permission by the family or caregiver, I still need to hear from the person that they want my help! I need to be invited into their life - particularly when their illness is difficult to discuss or terminal.

Second, the person may already have someone(s) with whom they discuss their emotional and spiritual issues. Thus, you need to be aware of what they might want or need from you. Perhaps they do not want to discuss their mastectomy or prostate cancer diagnosis with you. What they might need from you is help with yard work, laundry, or getting the children to soccer practices and music lessons. Such practical ways of helping are no less important than being someone with whom the person shares their deepest longings and greatest fears.

Finally, never use someone else's illness or loss as the occasion on which to project your own fears of illness, cancer, death or dying. If you feel the need to talk to someone about your own fears, hurts and life issues, find a pastor, counselor or another friend with whom to converse. Don't burden a sick friend or family member with your "stuff." They have enough to think about, without carrying your issues too.

In conclusion, when trying to help someone who is seriously ill or grieving, remember to be considerate in all you do. Try to put yourself in their shoes: What do they want? What do they need? Am I the person best able to help? When and how can I best help them?

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