

5 THINGS TO DO WHEN TRAGEDY STRIKES

By **Dan Myers** September 22, 2021



When you saw this title, your first thought might have been, "As a person suffering, what can I do?" When I speak of *5 Things to Do When Tragedy Strikes*, I'm not thinking of the person who suffers, but rather the comforter, the one who endeavors to be a listener and helper. My focus in this post is mainly about the comforter, who attempts to be a listener and helper. Even so, I write with the desire to communicate **love, compassion, and hope** to the person suffering. With that thought, let's begin.

You have just received a call informing you that your life-long friend has just received word he has a rapidly growing cancer that has metastasized. It has spread through the lymph system and is now in the brain as well. His prognosis is not good. He has little time left. You want to support your friend, but your mind is blank. You are thinking, "I must visit, but you would rather hide, yet, you know you must make that visit. And so, you call and set a time to see your friend.

When you arrive, the door is slightly ajar. Your friend calls, "come on in." At first, you are hesitant, but then you step inside.

You've done well so far, but once seated, what do you say next? You have this thought crashing through your mind, "Is there something I can do to make my friend more comfortable?" Silently you pray in a bit of desperation, "God, help me!"

Let me set the table for our *5 Things to Do When Tragedy Strikes*.

Always remember to keep things uncomplicated and simple. Don't feel you have to prepare and present a detailed theological statement to soothe your friend's physical, emotional, and perhaps spiritual needs. If the person is a Christian, you don't need to quote or read thirty-five verses that speak to him now, two or three perhaps at the most and at an appropriate time. *Help him understand how grateful you are to be there with him by simply saying, "Hi Jim, it's good to see you."* *Nothing more said is needed.*

What's next? Again, you may wonder, is this one of those moments when one's presence is better than words? Depending on your relationship and comfort level with each other, you might touch his arm or place your hand on your friend's shoulder. You might even hug your friend. These are some of the ways you express your love and concern when words are not needed.

In this visit, as you show empathy, you are already off to a beautiful start. You haven't recommended a New York bestseller book that promises to help a person step into eternity. You haven't tried to answer every question your friend may be thinking. There may be a time for that later, perhaps. For now, you have kept it simple in greeting your friend and sharing your heart and love in such a simple way. Cancer may eventually win, but you have won his heart that helps him face and enter eternity with dignity and grace.

He may have said little or nothing to this point. But I suspect your friend is exchanging more than simple talk. There may be some tears shed by both. If your friend is not all that verbally expressive, you might encourage him to tell you what's been going on. In most cases once you have gained their trust. A simple request or question will help your friend to engage.

Notice, we haven't asked the question "How are You?" That might be a question more appropriate in a later visit, but usually not the first. Your friend may never verbalize their thoughts, but when he hears that question when suffering, they may take it to mean, "How do you think I am! You can see for yourself."

So, a quick review.

Keep things uncomplicated and straightforward,
"Hello" or "Hi,"
A gentle touch may be enough.
Words may not be necessary now.
"Can you bring me up to date on what's been happening?"

When facing one of life's significant traumas, or even imminent death, most want to talk about that. This opens the door to help them talk about this unwanted and perhaps life's ending journey. Just letting that happen will be enough. Never force the issue! Let it develop naturally. You don't have to be prepared with notes or the last book on grief. In most cases, you need to say little, if anything. When visiting with most anyone, the reading of appropriate Psalms in most cases provides a canopy of peace.

Once your friend has opened his heart, you might say, *"I'm sorry."* *Some things happen that don't seem fair.* *"I'm sorry."* You have just shared your sorrow. Sharing your grief is a powerful act that allows you to connect with the other person's sorrow. If you do this well without many grizzly details, you have just made a load of sadness for the suffering person lighter.

Is it ever good to share personal experiences with the person suffering? In rare situations, yes. In most cases, no. Let me give you an example when sharing a personal experience was helpful and appropriate. When the medical team caring for our daughter suggested brain surgery that was then very experimental, our first question was, what are the potential benefits, and what would be the worst-case scenario? A medical team member said, *"I've had the procedure,"* and then explained the benefits. It was a game-changer, and we moved to the surgery with both confidence and faith. Our doctor connected us with HOPE and helped us set aside our baggage of fear.

The thought that one of the team physicians would share something personal created an emotional and mental bond with our family and the delicate surgery team. But generally, when a person is seeking to offer comfort, especially in that first visit, the risk is sharing too many personal details. It leaves the sufferer unrecognized as the person in need.

To this point, we have discussed some general things a person might do in the initial moments when seeking to be helpful. Now we can consider the very title of this post, *5 Things to Do When Tragedy Strikes*.

1. **Use personal experiences with careful discretion.** Personal experiences will often shift the focus from the one who suffers to the caregiver. In most cases, this is not the time to major in humor or share the experience of others who have suffered.

2. **Share personal experiences later than sooner.** If personal examples are shared, it is always essential to provide ample opportunities for listening before and after sharing personal experiences. When sharing one's trauma, that person often gets lost in the story and becomes a very poor listener.

3. **Be brief.** You don't have to share the details of the latest book on comfort, nor do you need to write a book from your own experience. You will know if more is called for by asking a simple question, *"Is there additional information I might get for you or help you with?"*

4. **Be careful how you handle a painful situation.** How you handle a situation can produce beautiful results or bring severe consequences. If you present yourself as an imperfect human being, struggling with and working through the issues, you may appear natural, and your words may provide comfort. But if you seem to be one step from sainthood, your story may appear judgmental or unreal to the suffering person.

5. **Avoid telling a fearful person about a traumatic surgery you have had.** The medical team best explains the surgery details. If you feel your experience would be helpful (determined by the patient), share how well you did after the surgery, your excellent recovery, and the steps you followed to bring back a full recovery. This may be an ideal time to share the comfort of Scripture if your friend welcomes that. Above all, consider how your story might affect a frightened person before you share it, yet understand, the Spirit of God can soften a hard heart or a questioning mind. In my more than sixty years of pastoral care, I have witnessed what God can do that I could not accomplish.¹

"Sharing your personal experience can communicate a powerful message: 'You are not alone.' Your personal story may also communicate hope to the other person. Just be careful not to shift the focus away from the suffering individual to yourself."²

1 Revised and adapted from Haugk, Kenneth C. Don't Sing Songs to a Heavy Heart. St. Louis, MO: Stevens Ministries, 2004, 60-61

2 Ibid