Without Casseroles and Crowded Churches: 10 Ways To Support The Grieving While Social Distancing

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Guest Post: Rev. Selena Wright

“Grief must be witnessed.”*

One of the greatest gifts of being a pastor is that when tragedy strikes and people feel powerless to support those who are hurting, I know my role. I offer presence. I sit with the bereaved as a physical reminder of the love of God and community. So when my brother-in-law died 18 months ago, yes, we were there in the immediate days; but we live eight hours away, and I struggled with how to support my sister-in-law and her three kids from a distance.

As the death toll continues to rise from COVID-19—and as cancer, heart attacks, strokes and other tragedies don’t care if there are more pressing issues—I keep thinking not just about those who have lost their lives, but all those left to grieve. Those who cannot celebrate the life of their loved ones in crowded churches; those who are living their nightmares without neighbors bringing casseroles or offering to take the kids to the park; and those without a pastor to pray with them, or a sister to hold their hand.

In her collection of quotes titled “Brave Enough,” Cheryl Strayed writes “If, as a culture, we don’t bear witness to grief, the burden of loss is placed entirely on the bereaved.” This is a challenge to sustain with zero social-distancing, but even with our current restrictions, the support of community remains necessary for the many who are grieving. While we cannot do what we have always done, what I found with my sister-in-law is that there were many ways, from a distance, that I could show up for her. So we compiled a list to get you thinking about how you might bear witness and offer support to your friends and family who are grieving while honoring necessary social distancing guidelines.

1. **Instead of taking a meal, mail gift cards or set up a time for delivery/take out.** The casserole of comfort is a staple of grief response, but as we seek to protect each other from the spread of COVID 19, pick up a gift card to a restaurant near their house that you know is offering take-out; or ask if you can have a meal delivered so they can just answer the door.

2. **If you need something from the store, they probably do too.** Everyone knows that toilet paper is the hottest item right now. Why not take that worry off of their plate by dropping off toilet paper on their porch or ordering it to be delivered?
If you are local, you might also pick up some basic staples that they could use anytime.

3. **Instead of a coffee date, schedule a phone or zoom call weekly.** (But also, give them room to back out at the last minute). While you’re at it, find out their favorite type of coffee or tea and order it or swing it by their porch.

4. **Recognize significant days.** Grief is a lonely time and can be even lonelier as time moves forward and it seems like others have ‘moved on.’ Sometimes a simple text that says “I know it has been six months since Dan died, I’m holding you close to my heart today.” Mark birthdays and anniversaries of life and of death on your calendar and reach out with cards or calls. When you do, speak the name of their loved one, it will remind them they are not alone.

5. **When the time comes, show up to the funeral.** Every family is making difficult choices about funerals and every state has different restrictions. Many will put the service online. If they do, participate and let them know you are there. If they postpone the service, even if it is 1-2 years later, commit to attending. Do not let the time that has gone by be an excuse to not show up.

6. **Offer concrete help as opposed to “Call me if you need anything.”** It can be hard for the person grieving to know what they need during early grief. Thinking of what to ask and who to ask can be more difficult. Instead of an open ended ‘if you need anything’ that will likely go unanswered, ask “Is it ok if I mow the lawn every Thursday?” or “I am on the way to the store, I’m getting you some toilet paper & snacks, what else can I get for you?” Then leave it on the porch to ensure no contact.

7. **Remember that all loss is painful and the pandemic can make it more difficult.** Remind them it is ok to feel whatever they are feeling: sadness, anger, fear, confusion, even joy. While we all will be seeking a new normal, create safe space for them to feel all that comes without comparison or judgement.

8. **Instead of offering general advice help them take the next step.** As they share their feelings of loneliness you might hear yourself say “You should Zoom with friends,” or “Find a grief group online.” When someone is grieving even simple tasks are difficult and many are struggling to navigate technology. Offer to help them set up a Zoom account. Set up a practice call or do your own Google search and send them the results for virtual grief groups. (Though be mindful that they might not be ready to take that step. Invite, but don’t push).

9. **Instead of saying, “I’ll pray for you” pray with them.** There is a difference between “for” and “with.” Both are important but the loneliness of grief yearns for shared sacred space. Take a minute to pray with them over the phone or send them (text, email, hand written) the words you pray for them.

10. **Instead of saying, “I wish there was something I could do,” offer the gifts that you can uniquely give.** Use your experience and expertise to help them. If you are an accountant share, with them strategies for filing as a widow/widower. Are you a musician? Record a meaningful song or create a playlist for varied emotions. If you’re a teacher- offer to check in with their children during distance learning. A medical professional could offer to be a sounding board when kids are sick. Coupon cutters can ask what coupons to can look for. Or for a lover of poetry, send them poems that might bring them comfort or give words for their pain. Whatever your gift—share it.
What we learned in the grief of our physically distant family is that location does not determine that amount of comfort and care you can provide. We must not be overwhelmed in the face of all we cannot do, because there are so many ways we can offer support and bear witness to the grief of those in our communities. Know that those who are grieving need you and although these small acts of kindness might feel insignificant in the face of their loss, you can remind the one grieving that they are not alone.

Rev. Selena Wright wrote this post with the help of her sister-in-law, Adrien Loehring. Adrien lost her husband, Mike, in 2018 and continues to thoughtfully and creatively reflect on the journey of grief she and her three daughters are walking together. Selena is Pastor of Kirk of Bonnie Brae UCC in Denver, CO and mother of three girls.