

Lifeway™ women

*GRIEF
RESOURCE*



LEADING THROUGH GRIEF



On June 2, 2002, Justin Sullivan was honored as *The Daily Oklahoman's* baseball player of the year. As a graduating senior from high school who was active in our student ministry, everyone celebrated his wonderful accomplishment. Little did anyone know, the next day Justin would be killed when the back wheels of a semi-tractor trailer broke off, crossed the center median, and killed him instantly.

As a staff member of my church, I arrived at the hospital and found myself ministering to family, to students, and to parents who were all grieving. In the days ahead, I realized nothing had prepared us to walk together through grief as a community. It's been close to 20 years since that loss marked us as a church and as church leaders. We found comfort in knowing Justin was with the Lord, but there are still days when the grief still seems fresh.

Grieving in community and knowing how to lead in the midst of grief is not a breakout seminar we often desire to take as leaders, but if COVID-19 has taught us anything, it's that we are watching and experiencing grief in new ways. And while many of us find closure and comfort by celebrating life through a corporate funeral or service, this, too, has been stripped away as families have grieved in isolation or without saying goodbye with traditional methods.

There are no simple steps to leading through grief because each situation is unique. There is no time table of grief. There is not a place on your to-do list you can check off and say it's done. But, as a leader, you can have a plan and be a learner. Through the power of the Holy Spirit, you can grieve together as a community of believers who have hope and have a heavenly Father who is always present.

LEARN TO LAMENT

Lament provides a language for entrusting God with our sorrow. When we find Jesus at the tomb of Lazarus in John 11, we find Mary and Martha surrounded by others who were consoling them in their time of grief. Jesus, when He saw Mary crying, cried with her. Jesus experienced grief with Mary, weeping with her. When we lament, we provide structure for expressing our sorrow to God. It allows us to process sorrow honestly and invites us to hold on to hope.

This morning I watched a coworker share her sorrow at the impending death of a family member. While the rest of us were unable to wrap our arms around her in comfort, I saw the faces of the rest of us on Zoom as we wiped away tears and grieved along with her. We prayed and we asked God to give comfort.

There are several stages of lament you can implement as you minister to others. First, acknowledge that we bring our sorrows to God. Second, through prayer, pour out your complaint. Describe your hurt, your heartache, and even your anger with transparency. Help others understand that God hears our lament.

Third, ask the Lord to respond to your grief. Invite Him into your pain. Fourth, express your trust. State what you hope is possible, with what you trust God for or what you wish you could trust Him for—even if you're not there yet.

Remember, it's important to grieve in community and not in isolation.



LEARN TO LISTEN

A beautiful example of grieving as a community is found in Acts 9. Luke describes a poignant scene of women who were grieving the death of their friend Dorcas. Verse 36 tells us that, "She was always doing good works and acts of charity." When Dorcas died, Peter arrived on the scene and found the women gathered together, and they showed him some of the garments she had made.

As a leader, one of the greatest gifts you can give to someone who is grieving is the sharing of stories and listening to the memories of those who have gone to be with the Lord. Maybe you have been touched by the life of the person who has died. Make a point to express what that person meant to you. Celebrate their life with the gift of stories and listening to other people share their stories. When Justin was tragically killed, prior to his funeral, our student pastor scheduled a time with our students. For more than two hours, they sang together and shared personal stories. It was medicine to the souls of those who were present and a gift to those who were struggling with why God would allow such suffering.

As you listen, remember that grief is not something to "get over" but something you "get through." Allow those who are grieving to know they are seen by Jesus. And remember that your presence is powerful. Luke 7 describes Jesus' encounter with the widow from Nain. As He traveled by the gate, He saw the body of her son being carried out. Verse 13 reminds us that "When the Lord saw her, he had compassion on her." As leaders, our compassion and listening skills are as important as any words you say.

KEEP BEING A LEARNER

If leaders are learners, then leaders must learn a better theology of grief. If you are in ministry for any length of time, this will be an important aspect of your ministry. You will be called to sudden moments of crisis and you will be called to sit among those who are grieving the diagnosis of a lengthy illness. So, keep learning. Challenge yourself to read a book on grief, attend a conference, or gather your ministry team and make plans to provide help to those you serve. Help others know how their spiritual gifts edify the body, both in joyous times as well as times of grief. Encourage others to use their gifts and talents to support others in grief. Give them practical suggestions, whether it's cooking a meal or writing a card.

Most of all, normalize the conversation around grief. Seek God's direction and share in the sacred space of connecting with others who are hurting.

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RESOURCES

A GRACE DISGUISED
by Jerry Sittser

A SEVERE MERCY: A STORY OF FAITH, TRAGEDY, AND TRIUMPH
by Sheldon Vanauken

A GRIEF OBSERVED
by C.S. Lewis.

DARK CLOUDS DEEP MERCY
by Mark Vroegop

UNTANGLING EMOTIONS
by Alasdair Groves & Winston Smith.

HEALING THE WOUNDS OF TRAUMA
by Trauma Healing Institute

RECOVERING FROM THE LOSSES OF LIFE
by Norm Wright

LOSS WORKSHOP
by Christian Counseling & Education Foundation (CCEF)

CENTERFORLOSS.COM
books and devotionals by Alan Wolfelt

SIDE BY SIDE
by Ed Welch

STUMBLING TOWARD WHOLENESS
by Andrew Bauman

COLORS OF GOODBYE
by September Vaudrey

CHOOSING TO SEE
by Marybeth Chapman

THROUGH A SEASON OF GRIEF
by Bill Dunn and Kathy Leonard

STEPHENMINISTRIES.ORG

HELP FOR THE GRIEVING

First, let us say, we are so sorry for your loss. We want to walk with you in this journey of grief, to help carry your burden with the ministry of presence through this resource. Grief is like a river, but not a river you cross—grief is like a river you walk through upstream. Sometimes the river is deep and cold, and you feel like you will drown. Other times, the water is more calm and shallow, and the sun is on your face. If you have suffered a significant loss, you will likely walk in that river a very long time. But the early stages are the most difficult and the most profound. It is healthy and important to face grief head on and step into the depths of that river. In this next section, we have provided some resources for you to consider as you begin this journey.

HOW DO I DEAL WITH MY GRIEF?

The following ideas and resources might be a comfort to you as you face this loss and the changes it brings.

Join a Grief Share group at a local church. A Grief Share group provides a sacred space to grieve with others who understand. You may think it might make you sadder to be with fellow grievers, but the experience has proven to be a comfort to thousands of people on a grief journey. A Grief Share group helps you to know what to expect, what is normal, and how to manage your grief through its stages.

Process your grief. It is important to process your grief with others, whether it is a good friend, a pastor or lay person in your church, or a professional counselor. In the early stages, this may be very hard. But when you are ready, talking about your loved one, looking at photos, and expressing what they mean to you can be very therapeutic.

Read books to understand what you are going through. There are many amazing books and resources on grief with helpful information. Whether you are looking for a devotional to read day by day, accounts of others who have been there before, or a workbook to practically take steps toward healing, options abound. Note: Some of the following suggestions are not Christian books but are foundational books on grief. See more options in the "Resources" section as well.

The Grief Recovery Handbook
by John W. James and Russell Friedman

On Grief and Grieving: Finding the Meaning of Grief Through the Five Stages of Loss
by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross

A Grief Observed by C.S. Lewis

Walking with God through Pain and Suffering
by Timothy Keller

Find a good counselor. Counseling can be an incredible tool and help during this difficult time and beyond. An unbiased person can be a guide as you process and heal.

While anyone can benefit from counseling, how do you know if you really need to speak to a counselor? If you become depressed, you should seek out a counselor. What does that look like? Prolonged or intense grief can develop into circumstantial depression. Symptoms of depression can include having trouble getting out of bed, a lack of motivation to function or do most basic tasks, disrupted eating patterns, or a lack of energy. Sometimes it's hard to discern if you are just really sad or depressed. One way to combat depression is to process your loss with a grief or another type of counselor.

How do I find a counselor?

If you are involved with a church, check with your pastor or someone on the pastoral staff to see if there is a counselor they can refer you to. Many churches have established relationships with trusted counselors.

The American Association of Christian Counselors is a great resource. Visit aacc.net to search in your area for a counselor.

Programs like Celebrate Recovery are also recommended, and more websites like aapc.org and biblicalcounseling.com can help you find a counselor in your area. Focus on the Family also has a help center you can call or contact via their website family.org.



MANAGING DAY TO DAY

People want to help you in your time of grief, but they don't always know how. People who have not experienced great loss do not understand and want to help but do not know the right thing to say and sometimes say insensitive hurtful things like "You will get over it" or "you can marry again" or "you can have another child" and the like. When you receive well-intentioned but hurtful remarks, it can be helpful to create a brief response to shift the conversation such as:

That's not going to work for me.

I'm still struggling. Please just pray for me.

Be kind to yourself. Grief is work, and it can be exhausting. Make sure you are getting good sleep and exercise. Be intentional about this and create boundaries around these practices. Seek a support group if you do not have one. When you are grieving, it is not a good time for isolation. The Bible tells us to bear one another's burdens, and when you are going through grief, you need gentle support from at least a few friends to help get you through. Even if you are sheltering at home during the pandemic, you can ask friends or family to reach out to you through the phone or computer. As we mentioned above, some people truly want to help you, but they don't know what to do to help. You may have to ask for specific types of support that you need most. Ask! They will likely be so happy to be able to DO something that you need that they wouldn't have come up with on their own.

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SUPPORTING FRIENDS + FAMILY WHO ARE GRIEVING

Grief is unique for each person. Each experience of grief is unique, and grief is unpredictable. Although you can sympathize with others, you can't really share the pain, weakness, or fear they feel. It is hard to explain how, at any moment, memories rush in and your coping mechanisms fall apart. In Job 6:2, Job lamented, "If only my grief could be weighed and my devastation placed with it on the scales." If only we could have a way to measure our grief—but its weight changes daily as we grieve.

Grief is universal. Although no one experiences grief and sorrow in exactly the same way, bereavement is an integral part of life. Just as we learn to love and live life with others in community, we learn a shared sorrow and experience grief together. No one will be exempt. People look to others to help them understand disappointment and discouragement. We have a deep desire to share our pain. In addition to God, we seek those who can comfort and walk beside us and carry our burdens (2 Cor. 1:3-5). When your whole way of life has changed, you are drawn to others who will help you navigate the confusion.

PRACTICAL WAYS TO SHOW YOU CARE

1. The ministry of availability and presence is a valuable way to come alongside someone who is struggling. Just be with them without offering "fix it" statements or solutions. Be comfortable with silence and let the suffering person take the lead on any conversation. Be a good listener by keeping eye contact at all costs. This is perhaps this person's most vulnerable moment. Be there for them by giving them your undivided attention. Ask gentle questions instead of suggesting what they might do. Let the Holy Spirit guide you. Be a literal or figurative shoulder to cry on.

2. Make a plan to connect with her regularly in multiple ways. I had a friend who committed to send me a verse by text every morning for months and months. I had some dear ones that contacted me in a different way each week—by text; phone call; email; sending a card, gift, or flowers; delivering a treat or meal; etc. Honestly, those who supported me in this way have a special place in my heart for their intentionality and persistence to hang with me for the long haul. But also remember, if you can only do something small, it's enough.

3. Holidays are often one of the most difficult times after loss. Often those grieving have no desire to celebrate anything as they navigate life without a loved one. My mother-in-law passed away on December 18 right as everyone around us celebrated Christmas and the New Year. I had no energy to plan any kind of celebration with my family although deep in my heart I wanted to honor Jesus' birth. A dear friend brought over gingerbread houses for us to decorate as a family. It gave us time to sit around a table and focus on something that was fun without discussing all the conversations that come with death and arrangements. Remember that birthdays and holidays are often difficult milestones for the grieving and a great time to let them know you are thinking of them with a card or text.

4. The power of presence is often stronger than gifts of remembrance. However, sometimes those gifts remind the grieving of your love and care when you cannot be present or when you live far away from one another. It may be a card, a plant, a tree, windchimes, or some type of lasting gift that brings a smile to those who are grieving months after their loss. These gifts remain after the meals and visits have stopped. Photos, memory books, or special items of the loved one can continue to bring precious memories to comfort and encourage those who are grieving.

5. Bibles, journals, or books that will comfort the friend who is grieving often say the words she needs. You may want to give your friend a Bible and underline or highlight specific verses she can read on days when her heart is aching for her loved one. A journal is a great way for her to reflect and write down special memories, lessons learned, and the feelings she is wrestling with after loss. There are a number of books on grief, loss, heartache that may bring comfort or help her process her grief. Or you may want to share a book that is simply a good read that can help lift her spirits during the long journey of grieving.

Grief can only be lifted by a good God. Some might disagree with me on this, and I do know that family and friends can bring great comfort. But I know in my sorrow that God has lifted my exhaustion and helped me to see more clearly as my eyes were blurred with tears. He is present when no one else is around—through long days and the darkest nights when you cannot sleep. He has been ever-present as I've cried for help and received His care (Ps. 40). He has been good in spite of the bad in the world. The emotional transition from grief will not be quick, but God is constant and faithful. Ultimately, I need Jesus, and not just those who resemble Him.

9 THINGS NOT TO SAY WHEN SOMEONE IS GRIEVING

Most of us have been there. We are experiencing a heartbreaking loss and our hearts, minds, and emotions are fragile. We need others to surround us and support us and help us to somehow hold it together. But then someone says something that shatters us even more. Their intentions may be good. They may be trying to bring peace and comfort in a moment of turmoil. But clearly their words are the wrong ones.

Grieving is a tender place—emotionally, mentally, physically, socially, and spiritually. For most people, loss is usually a prolonged grief, and hurtful words can be said in haste in the moment immediately following a loss or months after if you are not careful. Think before you speak. Remember that your presence is often much better than words. If you are going to write a card or speak with the one who is grieving, be very careful to avoid the following phrases. And when in doubt, consider that your presence in silence is better for healing sadness and sorrow than sugar-coated words or anything that sounds superficial.

1) **“I know what you are going through.”** Don’t assume or state that you “know what they’re going through.” You don’t. Even if you’ve had what you think is a similar struggle, there is no way to know exactly what another person is going through. We all experience hardship and grief in our own individual ways.

Say this: It would be more helpful to say something like, “I’m sorry you’re having to walk this road. It’s got to be so hard. But I think you’re brave, and I’m here for you—whatever you need.”

2) **“Praise God, she is in a better place.”** Although it may be true, don’t pressure your friend to “praise God” for the challenge that’s been thrust on her. She will find her way through the delicate minefield of finding God during her journey. She needs to know she can fear and be mad and, at the same time, love God. It’s better to encourage her to continue to talk to God about her fears and what’s hard for her on any given day. Be available to listen to her expressions of grief. There’s a pervasive feeling that hardship and loss is a thief that has stolen from you what is precious: your time, your attention, focus on your loved ones, and so much more. Spiritual footing is often shaken at a time like this, so having friends who understand and cheer you on is important.

Say this: Consider saying something such as, “I wish I could say the right thing to comfort you, but just know I’m here for you and I’m praying for you.”

3) **“Things will eventually get back to normal.”** Don’t reassure someone who’s walking through loss, crisis, or tragedy by telling them things will soon be back to “normal.” “Normal” is a setting on your dryer, not a realistic way to look ahead after life-altering events. Instead, reassure them that they will find a way to walk forward to the other side of their circumstances, and they are strong enough to do that. Maybe not today. But one day, they will. And God is carrying them through.

Say this: Instead, say something about how you will miss the person and her loss will be felt by so many people.

4) **“She lived a good, long life.”** Although this may be true, it does not always bring comfort to the grieving. Honestly, I found this phrase annoying when I lost my mom and my mother-in-law. I found that I needed the statement couched with other words. I needed to hear how these two very important women in my life had an impact on others and were leaving a legacy of faith. I needed to hear that the life well-lived made a difference in the past and would make a difference in the future lives of those they loved.

Say this: Share a few words of how the deceased impacted your life and how you are better for it.

5) **“There is a reason for everything.”** As believers we know God has a plan and purpose for our lives. However, on this side of heaven, we often do not know all His reasons for why life unfolds the way it does for some people, and why some lives seem to be cut short with death. Often people say things with good intentions but for whatever reason their words do not help console the grieving. Navigating death is uncomfortable, stressful, and sometimes even scary. Failing to acknowledge the hurt and pain of the grieving with upbeat and positive statements sometimes comes across as flippant and thoughtless.

Say this: Remember that saying, “I’m so sorry for your loss” speaks volumes to the grieving.

6) **“Heaven just gained another angel.”** Although this may sound comforting and a nice idea while dealing with grief, it is poor theology. God separates humans and angels in what they were created to be (Ps. 8:5). Matthew 22:29-30 probably added to this mix up and why people may say that the loved one has become an angel. But Hebrews 1:14 tells us that angels are “ministering spirits sent out to serve those who are going to inherit salvation.” And then 1 Corinthians 6:3 tells us that we will judge the angels. It can all be rather confusing. In the end, we don’t want to do anything that brings more confusion during a time of grief or promotes poor theology when someone is so vulnerable.

Say this: Instead, refer to Galatians 4:7 or Romans 8:17 and remind your friend that believers are heirs with Christ and will be like Him (1 John 3:2).

7) **“Don’t cry.”** Never express that someone should not cry or display their emotions. Grief is holy. God is in that grieving moment full of tears. It is a natural function of the physical body to release tears in grief. Tears are healing. Let the person cry. And think about your actions when the person is crying. Do your actions imply that they should stop? Patting someone on the back and saying, “There, there” implies that it is time to dry up the tears. Don’t try to contain or control her emotions. With grief there is denial, anger, and other emotions and stages in the grieving process. Those grieving need to process and experience the emotions.

Say this: Encourage your friend that emotions are part of the process, and affirm that it is okay.

8) **"You should be better now."** Just because believers have hope does not mean they will avoid deep grief. They just grieve with hope. Grief is a process and each person has a different timeline. Grief is something she carries; at first it is so heavy, she may feel it will crush her. With time it becomes lighter, but it is still with her. Grief lingers. Grief does not follow any rules. It becomes part of her journey of life.

Say this: "What you're going through is a hard process, and processes take time. Even though we have hope, that does not make the pain you're experiencing easy."

9) **"Call us if you need anything."** You can say it, but your friend usually won't call you. She may not even know what she needs. It is more helpful to just do it, especially domestic responsibilities. Bring the meal. Show up at the door with a lasagna, bread, and salad. Come with yellow gloves on to clean her house. Do a few loads of laundry for her. Drop off muffins or a snack that are already prepared. Work with your gifts and talents or provide something she may need. It may mean simply showing up and sitting or helping go through the mail.

Say this: Instead of saying, "Call if you need anything," say "I will call you" and then do it.

6 PRACTICAL WAYS TO SUPPORT + NEXT STEPS

Gifts, cards, and care packages to consider

- A bouquet of flowers or a plant can add some beauty to a dismal day.
- A scented candle and a card with Scripture or a prayer can add a bright spot of hope.
- Some care items like lotion, tea, slippers, or a soft robe can encourage comfort and personal care.
- Gift certificates for restaurants, grocery stores, or food delivery services can ease someone's load to plan and pay for meals.
- Put something on your calendar to check in with the person who is grieving. Sending a note or text periodically lets her know people still care long after the initial weeks of her loss.
- Note holidays near the time of your friend's loss. Acknowledge the first anniversary of the loss, first birthday, or holiday without the loved one.

Remember that your words are powerful. Your words can bring health and healing. They can be life-giving. However, they can also trigger hurt, pain, sorrow, false guilt, or survivor's guilt with the grieving. Because of the fragile state that someone may be experiencing, your words will be remembered. It is always good to point your grieving friend to God's Word that does not return void. Only God can heal the deep ache and wound in your friend's heart. Consider some of the following verses to help you as you strive to bring encouragement and hope to your grieving friend.

Comforting Scripture to Send in a Card or Text

From Psalm 16: **"Protect me, O God, for I take refuge in You." "You are the Lord, my only source of well-being." "Lord, You give me stability and prosperity; You make my future secure." "I constantly trust in the Lord; because He is at my right hand, I will not be upended. So, my heart rejoices, and I am happy; my life is safe." "You lead me in the path of life."**

"The Lord is my shepherd; I have what I need." Psalm 23:1

No one can shepherd us like God; praying He gives you all you need during this time of grief.

"The Lord is good, a stronghold in a day of distress; he cares for those who take refuge in him." Nahum 1:7

Praying you will sense God's presence today and know He cares for you.



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Betsy Langmade is the Manager of Lifeway Women events. She is passionate about the ministry of events and serving the women who attend them. Married to her best friend, Dave, Betsy enjoys spending all of her free time with her husband, their adult kids, and their growing families.

BIBLE VERSES THAT MAY BRING COMFORT

The Psalms are full of verses that help someone voice her thoughts and feelings in the midst of grief and sadness.

TRY THESE:

Psalm 9:9	Psalm 30:5	Psalm 55:22
Psalm 18:2	Psalm 34:18	Psalm 71:20-21
Psalm 22:24	Psalm 37:39	Psalm 73:26
Psalm 23	Psalm 46:1-2	Psalm 138:7
Psalm 27:4-5	Psalm 48:14	Psalm 142:1-3

ADDITIONAL VERSES TO CONSIDER:

Proverbs 14:32	Matthew 6:19-34
Isaiah 25:8	Matthew 11:25-30
Isaiah 40:18-31	Romans 8:31-39
Isaiah 49:14-16	1 Peter 5:6-7
Nahum 1:7	Revelation 7:15-17
Matthew 5:4	Revelation 21:4

