

Caring for People and Families in Crisis

Ideas and Suggestions for Helpful, Thoughtful, and Compassionate Ministry

Cultivating compassion in youth to walk with peers or loved ones in their lives of the congregation is a vital skill we must nurture and teach. There are many reactions to people experiencing a crisis. Some people react by remaining silent, fearing they will say the wrong thing or feeling it's simply too hard to get too close; they are absent or simply lack confidence about helping. Others react by sharing their own stories of crisis they know or have experienced, grasping to find a human connection. But, in turn, those in crisis might find it diminishing of their experience or creating more anxiety in an already anxious time. Then there are those who show up as triage companions; they drop by the hospital or home, they give gifts or toys, and they are sending messages of love. Yet after a week, they are gone; likely they have crisis triage fatigue and move on with their busy lives, forgetting many people's crisis journeys are long with many stages. These and many other reactions to people in crisis are not isolated to young people; these are also the reactions of adults who may never have been taught skills to walk with people in crisis with compassion and for the long haul. Knowing each person or family in crisis is unique with different needs, we can learn how to respond and be present in a compassionate way together.

The BIG Three!

There are the first three things to do when you find out there is a crisis in your community.

- 1. Ask and Offer**—Since we know each crisis and each person is different and unique, run any ideas by the person or family before simply doing something. They get to control the narrative of their crisis. They may want meals, gifts, or visitors, or they may want nothing at all. We have to honor that people are different and have different needs, and we need to listen. Also, try offering something, rather than asking what they need. We often don't know exactly what we need while managing the stress of a crisis, so suggesting things can be helpful.
- 2. Set Up a Central Point Person**—Before you get your youth or congregation rallied around a family in crisis, create a list of potential point persons to manage all the gifts and support. The same rule goes for a congregation with a youth in crisis. The main point person should be organized, be proactive, and have healthy boundaries. Then let the family in crisis approve a few point people and get Caring for People and Families in Crisis Ideas and Suggestions for Helpful, Thoughtful, and Compassionate Ministry someone in place. The point person might want to make a care team to help the youth and/or congregation brainstorm and implement the ideas. The point person (and care team) then vet all offers of gifts, help, and care, and all support must be approved by them (which they will run by the person and family in crisis). Reversely, the family in crisis has one person to reach out to for help. The point person might also reach out to the schools and neighborhood to also identify themselves so that they can help manage those gifts and support too.
- 3. Avoid Saying I Know How You Feel**—Wait, you do? No, you really don't. Each person and each crisis is different, and throughout the crisis feelings and needs change too. Try to encourage all those wanting to support the family to listen, be present, and not assume that you are really understanding it at all. Avoid statements like, "You probably feel ..." "I understand and know how you feel," or "I know this is not the same but ..." Those statements assume too much. Statements that might show you are listening and are present might be "I hear you," "This is hard, and I care about you," or "I am here if you need anything."

Ideas

Since we know each crisis and each person is different and unique, these ideas were collected from a variety of people who have shared what was most helpful in their time of crisis.

- **Money**—A crisis is typically expensive. Think medical bills, legal fees, transportation costs, the loss of an income or reduced income due to leave from work, new “stuff” that is needed, and so on. Gift cards are a generous offer, but those in crisis then have one more thing to manage—did we bring the gift cards, we have a gift card for this gas station not that one, did we register this Visa gift card online, etc. Cash, checks, Venmo, or a GoFundMe can be much simpler for managing extra funds needed in a crisis. The only exception to this might be Amazon.com gift cards since you can load them simply and quickly to an account.
- **Home Cleaned**—Pay to have their home professionally cleaned by a cleaning service they already use or someone else highly recommended. If the crisis is ongoing, set up a schedule. Also, professional carpet cleaning is a great additional gift if they have carpets. Or line up a laundry service (wash and fold; dry cleaning) or pet care/pet day care.
- **Meals**—Set up a meal train through one of the many meal train website tools! Ask the family in crisis how often and for how long they would like the meal train. Check back in throughout the journey to see if it’s enough or too much and then make adjustments. Ask about favorite foods and foods to avoid and if they want dessert with every meal. Ask what time they want the meals delivered and if they want the meals delivered by knocking on the door or left in a cooler by the front or back door.
- **Yard and Home Maintenance**—Offer to mow the lawn, wash the windows, plant flowers outside, etc. Are there jobs that can be done and barely seen so that those in crisis do not have to interact with you if they are too exhausted?
- **Notes**—This could be texts, letters (unless needed to be isolated from outside germs), or emails. Send them to all the immediate family connected to the crisis; the grandparent needs to feel loved as she or he cares for her or his grandchild as much as the main person in crisis. Consider setting up a schedule of people so that they are getting a note every week for the long journey, not all at once at the beginning. In the note, you could add meaningful poems, prayers, funny cartoons, or other engaging and thoughtful pieces. Remember to include siblings too.
- **Caregiver Breaks**—Is it possible to give caregivers a break? Offer to entertain the siblings or take over sitting by the hospital bed. Offer a break and suggest specific days and times when you would be available.
- **Companionship**—Plan and schedule times to spend with those in crisis. Maybe that’s having a meal together, joining them at the hospital bedside, playing video games, or taking selfies on Snapchat. Let those in crisis manage your visit. Ask at the very beginning of the visit how long you should stay; boundaries and clear end times to the visit are helpful. Let the family know that if something comes up, you can leave anytime. Ask what they’d like to do. Offer to listen to what’s been going on or offer to not bring up the crisis at all if they need a break from talking about it. If the family in crisis has a Caring Bridge or blog, make sure you are up to date reading it so that you don’t ask them to repeat things they have already shared. Let the person you are visiting be the leader in this visit.

- **Gifts**—In some crisis situations, gifts are perfect. They bring joy in a lot of scenarios. Homemade gifts are thoughtful as it takes time to prepare, plan, and execute the gift like a prayer shawl, quilt, or homemade stress ball. But sometimes gifts are a burden. Many toys, flowers, and gift baskets pile up and clutter spaces, thus adding more for the family to manage. Be sure to ask about gifts before just bringing them by.
- **Advocacy Support**—Support fundraisers like a 5K, a gala, or other events that are specific toward the crisis you are supporting. If it's a medical crisis, the hospital likely has a foundation that can let you know of all ongoing fundraisers you could support. Also, if there is legislation in your state or federal government that is meaningful and related to those in crisis, write letters to Congress and rally for that cause.

At the end of the day, remember to say something and do something. If this is a person you love, your intentions are louder than any mistakes you make while trying to be supportive and compassionate. Continue to check in by asking the family questions. Am I doing enough? Am I saying the right things? And then keep trying. Your presence and compassion will be an immeasurable gift.

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