

CARING AT A

Distance



FAMILYLIFE®

A background image showing a smartphone with a call in progress and a bowl of soup. The phone screen displays a red 'End Call' button and a green 'Accept Call' button. The name 'Ellen' is visible at the top of the screen. The soup is yellow with green garnishes.

Comforting and Caring

at a Distance During Quarantine

BY RON DEAL AND JANEL BREITENSTEIN

What does comforting a loved one and caring at a distance look like during the quarantine? For starters, find ways to make your compassion unmissable.

Maybe, like us, you've lost someone in this strange twilight of COVID-19. Or maybe the losses are smaller, trailed by the jagged, churning edges of a world pandemic. We're not the only ones to attempt caring at a distance.

ISN'T "CARING AT A DISTANCE" AN OXYMORON? Because right now, grief feels more common than a closed front door.

It's in the loss of a senior year. A finalized adoption. A job. Your parents' presence at the birth of a child. Friends moving with only a virtual goodbye. A birthday without friends.

The nonmaterializing internship or anniversary vacation. The flare-up of a mental illness. The kids home when you're a single mom with zero support.

Or even a death. Maybe it's a COVID-19 death, which is so much more than a statistic to you.

And though grief itself indeed isolates—each of us mourning our very particular losses—there is also great purpose in *grieving in community*.

Without that community, that collective us-against-loss, you're likely feeling regret, guilt, even paralysis.

Author Dave Furman writes, “To show sympathy means literally ‘to shake the head.’”¹

Resonating in empathy together is to fully feel and display the wrongness of what’s happened, the gravity and value of what’s been lost. We reiterate, *this is indeed a loss. This is worth sorrow. This is not how God designed the world to be.*

Perhaps this is just one reason we’re “blessed” when we mourn (Matthew 5:4). We mourn not only with others, but alongside the ways God’s own heart breaks.



UNMISSABLE COMPASSION

We see Jesus—who carried our sorrow (Isaiah 53:4)—manifest this in full display at the tomb of His friend Lazarus (see John 11). He’s individually and uniquely comforting Lazarus’ sisters, Martha and Mary.

Interestingly, his own “caring at a distance” was purposeful. The sisters asked why He did not arrive sooner—but He soon proves His waiting was a product of love for them.

And at the tomb, fully aware of the history-making phenomenon God is about to perform, Jesus still interacts with their bleeding, searing questions.

And He weeps with them. In fact, the Greek verb itself elsewhere in Scripture has meant indignance, rage, and stern warning. Jesus wasn’t just sad with them. He was angry at this departure from God’s original purpose for the world, even though He voiced God’s clear intention of Lazarus’ death for His glory (John 11:4).

Jesus’ compassion must have been unmissable. People watching remarked, “See how he loved him!” (John 11:36).

HOW CAN WE
MAKE OUR OWN
COMPASSION
unmissable?

How can we make our own compassion unmissable?

SHRINK THE DISTANCE

Paul alludes to our need to minimize our disconnectedness amidst his own literal house arrest in Rome, where he wrote his letter to those following Jesus in Philippi: “I thank my God in all my remembrance of you,” he writes (Philippians 1:3). He speaks of praying for them; “I hold you in my heart” (1:7).

Because helping carry the load is how we fulfill the entirety of God’s commands (see Galatians 6:2). It’s how we love our neighbor as ourselves. How we play out the story of God reaching out to us in our own isolation from Him.

Paul did this through letters. God does this with His Spirit. How can we close the gap?

- **Reach out virtually.**
- **Check in consistently**—not unlike how Paul wrote multiple letters. Create a seamless sense of presence.
- **Let creativity thrive in restraint.** Paul wrote seven books of the Bible while under arrest—and they changed the world . . . arguably

1. Furman, Dave. *Being There: How to Love Those Who Are Hurting*

more than anything he did outside of prison. If you're disrupted by COVID-19, *be a bigger disrupter*. How will you break back into people's lives? How will the church show up?

Perhaps you'll

- read a story virtually to a child, or chat while coloring.
- call a friend who struggles with anxiety or isolation.
- share a link to your church's virtual service with an interested friend.
- hold a virtual graduation or other ceremony.
- FaceTime wearing a giant, crazy, event-worthy hat.
- pile out of your car and wave with banners.
- host a "card shower," gathering friends to send greeting cards and gift cards.
- leave packaged snacks on a doorstep.
- go for a socially distanced walk, keeping 6 feet away.
- have dinner together virtually.

CARING AT A DISTANCE WHEN SOMEONE DIES

But what could caring at a distance look like when the loss . . . is someone's life? How can you virtually *mourn* the loss of God's image through that person's imprint on your lives?

- **"Hug" one another's hurt** (or help them find someone who can "hug" better than you) by emotionally receiving and exchanging hurt and stories, holding one another close.
- **"Show up" repeatedly** via Facetime, HouseParty, or the old-fashioned phone call.

- **Don't ask, "What can I do?"** Just do something. Or keep calling.
- **Send flowers or a symbol of your support, but don't stop there.** Follow up with a personal call.
- **Eat "Tear Soup" together.** Say, "I'm sorry you have to live with such pain and stress. Tell me the story of what happened." Talk only to actively listen, affirm, validate feelings, cry with them, and pray with them. Repeat, repeat, repeat.

Rick Taylor reminds us in *When Life is Changed Forever*,

It often seems that one of the measures of a mature Christian regarding death is how much we rejoice and how little we cry . . . The longer we grieve, the weaker we appear. But biblical Christianity makes a distinction between "grieving" and "grieving without hope."

. . . Grief over loss is something natural and normal. It is something we ought to do.

When COVID-19 is over and we all emerge blinking from our doors, continue with the rituals of grief: the memorial service. The casseroles.

When you've been caring at a distance, the emotional gap won't be as vast when that day comes. And your friend or family member won't be as emotionally remote, caving in around his or her loss in solitude.

So let your care be greater than the coronavirus. Let your reaching out be as intentional as the CDC.

And together, begin to heal.

When You're Primarily Comforting



- **"HUG" ONE ANOTHER'S HURT** (or help them find someone who can "hug" better than you) by emotionally receiving and exchanging hurt and stories, holding one another close.



- **"SHOW UP" REPEATEDLY** via FaceTime, Houseparty, or the old fashioned telephone call.



- **DON'T ASK, "WHAT CAN I DO?"** They'll respond, "nothing." Just do something, or keep calling.



- **DO SEND FLOWERS OR A SYMBOL OF YOUR SUPPORT.** But don't think that's enough. Follow it up with a personal call.



- If the friend or family member is on a ventilator, **FOCUS ON LOVING THOSE CONNECTED TO THEM**, including your friends/family.



- **EAT "TEAR SOUP" TOGETHER.** Say, "I'm sorry you have to live with such pain and stress. Tell me the story of what happened." Then, talk only to actively listen, affirm, validate feelings, cry with them, and then pray with them. Repeat, repeat, repeat.

What to Say & Not Say

to Someone Who Is Grieving

NOT THAT:

1. I know how you feel.

No you don't. Some feelings are common to all grief. But still you don't know what that person feels in this exact situation.

2. I can't imagine what you're going through.

You're trying to acknowledge the magnitude of their loss. But the message to the person is: Wow, what a horrible thing you're going through.

3. God did this for your good and for His glory.

Even if it's true, it doesn't help right now. Theological platitudes do not fix pain.

4. I'm so impressed that you're handling this so well.

What does that even mean? Often that is only shock; they haven't processed the grief yet. So when they do encounter the grief, it makes them question their faith. Or they feel guilt over the flood of the emotions.

SAY THIS:

1. I care for you. I love you. I'm sorry.

Something that acknowledges that you're caring for them and they're hurting is enough.

2. Invite them to talk about the person they lost.

3. Consider yourself hugged.



A challenge we never wanted to encounter has spread at the speed of coronavirus: the challenge of grieving alone. Countless family members and friends find themselves unable to gather to grieve collectively, at least not in the traditional way. We long to soothe their pain.

Mailing condolence cards and leaving flower bundles on front porches are wonderful touches, but there's something more powerful we can do to care from a distance.

We can pray.

We can still "draw near to the throne of grace, that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need," (Hebrews 4:16). We've been granted the privilege of going before God on behalf of others. And we should use it.

If you have a friend who's grieving, here are four prayers you can pray for them.

Pray
they will let
themselves
GRIEVE.

Lord, I pray they wouldn't shove away their grief. Help them feel their sadness and use the privacy of their home as a safe place to process openly. Allow the people in their home to grieve together and not be afraid to admit their feelings.

Pray
AGAINST
their isolation.

Lord, please help my friend resist self-isolation, though they might be tempted. While they might be stuck alone in their homes, encourage them to reach out for prayer and help they might need. Protect them from embarrassment by their grief. Help them receive the love others give them. I ask also that more of their friends would think of creative ways to draw near and comfort them.

Pray
they would
not feel
ALONE.

Lord, remind them they are not alone in their grief. Help them see how others, too, value what they've lost. You yourself understand grief. You gave up Your own Son for us, knowing the suffering it would cost You. Let the realities of others suffering the same thing bear this person up, encouraging them to further lean on Your strength.

Pray
for their
PRAYER
LIFE.

Lord, please help them keep communication open with You. Remind them You can handle their anger, disappointment, confusion, and every other emotion swelling up within them. You hate death just as much as they do and understand how it influences mind, soul, and strength. Keep your compassionate and loving nature at the forefront of this person's mind.

Prayer is not the “least you can do.” It’s the most you can do. Let’s not forget to care for our loved ones from afar in this powerful way.