

6 Simple Ways You Can Minister to a Bereaved Mom

As a mother of four, I've not endured the death of a child. I haven't known the gnawing emptiness of losing a daughter or a son.

Yet for the last seven years, I've had the holy privilege of walking alongside families mourning the loss of loved ones. Many of these, some of whom have now become precious friends, are mothers who have lost children. In friendship with these grieving moms, walking with them through some of their darkest days, I've noticed a bit of what helps and what hurts.

Though every mother's grief is unique, here are a few things I've learned.

1. Be present. Some of us are afraid to be engage with the mother who's lost a child because we're driven by one big overwhelming silencing and wall-building fear: I don't know what to say. Guess what? You're in good company. No one knows what to say.

But the good news is that the mom who's grieving doesn't expect you to have the right combination of magical words that will make it all better. There are no words, in any language, that can do that. What moms most need is your presence. Bring her a Diet Coke. Text her to let her know you're thinking about her. Stop by her house and sit on her couch. Listen to her. Sit with her in silence. Ask about her heart. Clean her bathrooms. Bring her a Panera's gift card. Write her a letter about what you loved most about her child. Help her organize her child's belongings.

Moms don't need you to say the right words. Moms need to know that you remember and that you care.

2. Talk about the child who died. Understandably, you fear that mentioning the child a mom has lost will cause her to become sad. You want to spare her that upset. But most likely, the discomfort is more on your end than on hers. She's already sad, and mentioning her child doesn't compound her grief. In fact, it is more painful for many mothers when friends and neighbors and co-workers don't mention the loss of the child they love.

Want to know a secret? Most moms who've lost a child will assure you that saying something awkward is better than saying nothing at all.

And like all moms, a mother who is grieving may want to talk about her child. She wants to celebrate and remember and grieve what was precious and funny and difficult and unique about the child she loves. She may even fear forgetting the unique little quirks that made her child unique.

Don't be afraid to talk about her son or daughter

3. Listen. The mother who has lost a child may not have many people who are willing or able to listen to her. Her spouse or parent or child or sibling is experiencing their own grief and may be unable to be present to her in the ways she most needs.

Make yourself available to listen. Let her know you care and want to hear whatever she wants to share: the good, the bad, the ugly. Resist the natural impulse to weigh in with your opinions unless she asks.

Just listen.

4. Allow tears. If adults in your family weren't comfortable with their emotions, you may not be comfortable with your own. Don't let that discomfort drive you to squelch your own sadness or to avoid the sadness of the mom who's grieving.

It's alright for her to cry.

It's alright for you to cry.

Making room for her sadness, and your own, is a healing gift you can give moms who've lost a child.

5. Pray with the mother. The same fear that keeps us from engaging with moms who are grieving—"I don't know what to say!"—keeps us from praying with moms who are grieving. We fear that we won't know what to pray or that we'll say something stupid. And we might.

But prayer is a gift we can give to moms who are hurting. You don't have to have the right words to say. Pray in silence. Pray from a book of prayers. Pray Scripture.

Prayer reminds grieving moms that their hurts matter to you and matter to God.

6. Remember and return to the mother's loss. As weeks and months and years go by, it can be tempting to believe that if we don't mention her painful loss, we are doing a mother a service by not making her revisit it.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

Moms don't forget. In fact, the writer of Isaiah uses this very absurd hyperbole to demonstrate God's own holy remembering: "Can a mother forget the baby at her breast and have no compassion on the child she has borne?" (Is. 49:15).

The intuitive answer is, "No, of course not! Impossible!"

The prophet continues, "Though she may forget, I will not forget you!" (Is. 49:15).

God does not forget us—in our hurt and loss and grief—and the mom you love does not forget her child. She doesn't forget after the funeral. She doesn't forget after she's returned to work. She doesn't forget when she gives birth to another

child. She never forgets.

Mark the child's birthday and anniversary of his or her death on your calendar so you can continue to connect with the mother who has not forgotten.

I know how scary it can feel to walk alongside mothers who have lost a child. But as you do, know you are not alone. As you walk with mothers in their grief, you minister—with your face and voice and body—the words from God's own lips, "I will not forget you!" (Is. 49:15). {eoa}

Linda Znachko is the author of *He Knows Your Name* and founder of the ministry by the same name. *He Knows Your Name* gives children a name in life and dignity and honor in death. She also partners with mothers who do not want their children's legacies to be the circumstances of their death. Her aim is to assist the grieving to find healing and purpose in knowing every life is sacred to God. A sought-after speaker, Znachko works to bring attention to the problem of abandoned, unwanted and marginalized children.

For more information about Znachko and her ministry, visit , on Facebook (*HeKnowsYourNameMinistry*) and via Twitter (*@LindaZnachko*).