

How to Minister Effectively to the Chronically Ill

Christians get high marks when it comes to ministering in crises. But when it comes to meeting the long-term needs of the chronically ill, most fail to earn a passing grade.

Sure, their intentions are good, but most lack the information, tools and resources they need to minister effectively to the chronically ill. What are the unique needs of this group, and how can we, as the body of Christ, meet them?

Voices of Chronic Illness

“You get lonely,” explains Elizabeth Burchfield, who lives with multiple chronic conditions, including myofascial pain disorder and arthritis. “You want so much to see someone else but don’t have the energy to even go to church.”

Rennie Ellen Auiler, a cancer survivor who lives with ulcerative colitis and other chronic illnesses, describes the fatigue that comes with chronic illness as completely debilitating. “Not the tiredness healthy people experience after a long day, but the mind-numbing, crawl-into-a-hole-and-die kind of fatigue that never goes away.”

“It’s a challenge to deal with the ‘roller coaster’ of chronic illness,” says Judy Gann, who lives with fibromyalgia and other autoimmune system disorders. “I may feel reasonably well one day and be flat in bed the next.”

Symptoms like these make it difficult for the chronically ill to participate in activities others may take for granted. Things like going to church, sitting through a Bible study, walking around a shopping mall, driving to a retreat—all can seem daunting to someone living with chronic illness.

To meet the needs of the chronically ill most effectively, we need to step outside the four walls of the church and into the homes and communities of those in pain. We need to enter their world. It's what Jesus would do.

Tips for Individuals

Rev. Liz Danielsen, chaplain and founder of Spiritual Care Support Ministries, says the best gift we can give to the chronically ill is the gift of presence. "Time is the greatest gift we can give each other," she explains. "Simply saying, 'I would just like to be with you.' Jesus did that. I think we need to talk less and be present more."

When we do say something, it is critical we say something that helps, not hurts, the chronically ill. Chronic illness experts offer these suggestions:

Do say:

- "I'm sorry you're hurting. Know that I'm here for you."
- "Tell me about your condition. I want to understand how I can help."
- "If you'd rather not talk about it, I understand."
- "I admire your courage and strength in handling your illness. You're an inspiration and encouragement to me."

Don't say:

- "I understand." People experience pain differently. Even if you have the same condition, your experience is different from someone else's.
- "But you look so good!" This implies if you were *really* sick, it would show.
- "It could be worse." This invalidates the chronically ill's experience of pain.
- "God's grace is sufficient." Although true, it comes across as insensitive and can leave the chronically ill feeling invalidated.

Keep in mind:

- Chronic conditions and illnesses are unpredictable. The chronically ill may feel fine one day but be in bed the next. Allow for last-minute cancellations and change of plans.
- Depression and suicide are more common for the chronically ill than the general population. Watch for depression, and seek help if needed.
- The divorce rate is high for the chronically ill. Support the marriage as well as the individual with the chronic condition.
- Life's challenges are far from simple and require more than pat answers and pithy platitudes. When in doubt, don't.

Tips for Churches

Lisa Copen, founder of Rest Ministries and author of *So You Want to Start a Chronic Illness/Pain Ministry* and *Beyond Casseroles: 505 Ways to Encourage a Chronically Ill Friend*, offers some ways local congregations can serve the chronically ill:

- Add live streaming services to your church's website.
- Send a complimentary CD of Sunday's sermon.
- Provide resources and information on chronic illness ministries and support groups.
- Post the bulletin and prayer requests on the church website, so individuals with chronic illness feel part of the congregation.
- Invite someone with chronic illness to share their testimony at church.

The needs of those who chronically suffer are unique. It takes effort and commitment to minister effectively. Because suffering is such an individual experience, "it's sometimes best to put the books aside and just let them teach you,"

Danielsen says.

The truth is, the chronically ill have a lot to offer. Their experiences give them insight and sensitivity that others may lack. When you meet someone with a chronic condition or illness, why not ask yourself, "What can I learn from this person's life?"

You might be surprised.

Mary J. Yerkes *is a writer, speaker and chronic illness coach. She is a contributor to such popular print and online publications as Focus on the Family, SAVED: A Multicultural Christian Magazine, Christian Coaching Magazine, On Mission, and The Quiet Hour, to name a few. Visit Mary online at .*

For the original article, visit .