

The Gift Everyone Can Give in the Wake of Harvey and Irma

As I think of Hurricane Irma bearing down on Florida and the impact of Hurricane Harvey on Houston, I believe it's a wonderful time to practice offering empathy. Simply put, *empathy* is the ability to walk in another's shoes.

The writer of Hebrews wrote, "For we do not have a High Priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who was in every sense tempted like we are, yet without sin" (Heb. 4:15). The Greek word used in this passage for the word empathize is *sumpatheo*. It means "to have fellow feeling with."

Empathy is what Paul was getting at when he wrote, "Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep" (Rom. 12:15). When we empathize, we help our friends feel heard and understood.

So how do we offer empathy in tangible ways? Here are a few ideas:

Validate feelings. When someone pours out their heart to you about how scary the hurricane was or about what they personally lost, don't talk them out of their feelings. Don't give them sugar-coated answers. Instead, seek to understand their feelings and let them know that those feelings make sense. Listen and simply *feel* with them. Let them know you care, and you're concerned. The goal of empathy is to build a bridge to the heart of your friend.

Allow your facial expressions to offer understanding. What do I mean? As people pour out their heart to you, show understanding by leaning forward and demonstrating concern through your eyes. If your friend is excited, mirror their excitement with your face!

Practice tangible acts of kindness. The other night, my daughter and I were flying out of Florida with her two babies. When we got off the plane, both were asleep. As we held each in our arms waiting for someone to bring the stroller up, the pilot got off the plane and asked us if anyone had retrieved the stroller for us. When we told him, “Not yet,” he put his bag down and went and got the stroller himself and set it up for us. The pilot demonstrated empathy in such a tangible way that touched both my daughter’s heart and mine. If you have friends who are suffering right now, send them a note, buy them Starbucks, send flowers, take them a meal or offer to watch their kids. Tangibly demonstrate your empathy with acts of kindness. You’ll be a blessing, and you know what? You’ll receive a blessing yourself—giving the gift of empathy always returns and helps you feel more connected. It’s a win-win!

I’d love to hear how you’ve demonstrated empathy or how someone demonstrated empathy toward you. Leave a comment! {eoa}

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