

When You Don't Know What to Say

This morning my Facebook newsfeed was filled with updates from people going through such difficult, heartbreaking situations. I spent thirty minutes, writing, rewriting, adjusting and writing again. It was very difficult to think of the appropriate thing to say to my friend who is fighting brain cancer or my friend whose child is in constant pain or my friend who just lost her beloved father to ALS.

I'm so frustrated by this because I really thought that one of the few benefits of our crisis would be knowing what to say to others in theirs. But I find myself at a loss so often. That's when I land in the write-and-erase gridlock which leads to paralysis which leads to no response at all. It's ironic, really, that some sweet sister fighting a fierce battle may be sitting at home thinking none of her friends care enough to respond when, in fact, many of them care *too much* to risk a wrong response. I'm sure many people who assumed I hadn't thought at all about their struggle, would be surprised to learn how *much* I thought and agonized before clicking out of that little box without pushing "post."

I'm sharing this today so that others will know they're not alone in this fear of saying the wrong thing at the wrong time. I am a writer and I often feel like I'm in the word weeds. But I'm tired of letting fear silence my compassion, and so I'm learning. I really *hope* I'm learning. And while I don't have an easy formula, here are the guidelines I'm using when responding to people in pain:

1. The closer you are to the person and the situation, the more latitude you have to speak freely. If you are not a close, personal friend of the one in crisis, keep your comments brief and encouraging. Don't offer advice

unless it specifically has been requested. If you feel you have something important to share, like a miracle cure or medical advice or a specialist they should contact, try going through someone who is closer to the person than you are, or send a private message. (And when you offer advice, always add permission for them to contact you for more information OR to disregard the suggestion entirely.)

2. Avoid comparing your situation to theirs, even if your situation seems identical on paper. Honestly, I think it's wise to avoid talking about ourselves at all in these moments ... just focus on encouraging the other person.
3. I don't think you can go wrong with, "I cannot imagine what you are going through. I am so sorry."
4. Say *something*. Because I really do think an imperfect something is better than well-intended nothing. People put stuff out on social media because—well, I guess I don't know all the reasons people do anything—but I assume they put updates out there because they want to know they're not alone. They hope that people will care and pray. That's all we need to do: care, pray and love. We don't need to have all the answers or write the words that heal all their wounds. The comments we say and send to people are, more than anything, a way of telling them: I see you, I acknowledge your pain, and I'm here. We just need to be present. And we can all do that, even though the words we wrap around it may feel risky and awkward—we can all be present.

Bo Stern is a blogger and author of *Beautiful Battliefields* (NavPress). She knows the most beautiful things can come out of the hardest times. Her Goliath came in the form of her husband's terminal illness, a battle they are still fighting with the help of their four children, a veritable army of friends and our extraordinary God. Bo is a teaching pastor at Westside Church in Bend, Oregon.