

FIVE THINGS TO REMEMBER WHEN TRAGEDY STRIKES

By Joe McAlpine

It was a Sunday morning and I was running around the church trying to finish all of the last minute details, cover my volunteer gaps and make sure that everyone was on the same page. It was going to be a huge weekend, and I wanted to make sure that everything went off perfectly.

It was then that my phone began to ring and I noticed that I was getting a phone call from a former volunteer of mine who had moved out of state. I remember thinking, "That's odd that she would call me on a Sunday morning . . . she knows how busy I am." I went to my office and accepted the call. I said hello and asked how she was. It was then that she dropped the bombshell on me. "My 13-year-old son passed away in his sleep last night."

I felt as if I couldn't breathe. I had her son in my group while they lived in my town. We were as close as families could be while they lived near us. I loved them like family, and now they were turning to me during one of the most heart wrenching and terrifying times a parent could ever face. What would I say to them? What COULD I say to them? There was no fix, cure or scripture that was going to make this situation right. I did what I could, I sat there with her on the phone and cried with her. It was the only thing that felt right.

After I hung up the phone with her that day, I remember thinking, I don't want to do this anymore. By "this" I meant ministry. I didn't want to experience the pain and helplessness I was feeling at that time ever again. It was then that I felt God comfort my soul and encourage me to continue on. I knew that God was placing me in the middle of that storm to show His love and presence. All I had to do was be present and mourn with them.

One doesn't enter into the mess of ministry and never experience tragedy. Tragedy is a part of life, and walking through life with people is what we sign up for when we say "Yes" to our calling. Over my 15-plus years in ministry, I have walked through too many tragedies to count. Some have been my own, and some I've walked through with others. Through every one, though, there is one constant: My first temptation is always to run. I want to run because I don't know what to say or because I am overwhelmed with grief or fear. I want to run because I don't feel like I possess enough to be of any service or help. I think maybe we all struggle with those feelings when tragedy comes. What sets us apart as ministers, though, is when we don't surrender to those thoughts.

Here are five things to remember when tragedy strikes.

Don't try to fix it. Just listen.

Decide that it is not your job to fix them or their tragedy. It is your job to be present and truly listen. Sometimes we can be quick to offer them a program when we feel the need to fix it for them. Rarely does someone expect you to fix it. Most often, they just want to be heard. Hear them. Enter into their pain and cry with them. Empathize with them. Relate to their situation.

Make their mess your priority.

Pay attention as they talk. If they have an oncology appointment on Tuesday at 9 a.m., call them Monday and let them know you are praying for them. If they are going into their first divorce court appointment on Wednesday afternoon, shoot them a text letting them know you're thinking of them. Add reminders in your calendar to call or text at certain times. Show up for a chemo appointment and hold their hand. Make their tragedy part of your week.

Don't treat a season like a moment.

We can show up with a meal once, but six months can go by in a blink if we aren't paying attention. If you have only checked in once, that's definitely not enough. People living through a season of tragedy need several follow-ups. The grieving doesn't end at the funeral and the struggle doesn't end with the first sober coin. Ask them often how they are doing. Add them to your personal prayer list and let them know that you are lifting them regularly. Reach out even when it's uncomfortable. They will appreciate it and you will be better for it.

Don't try to explain away their tragedy.

This is a roadmap for what not to say and what you could say instead. Don't say: "God must know what He's doing;" "God works in mysterious ways;" "God needed them more than you did;" "This will be part of your testimony someday;" or "This too shall pass." As a general rule, if it is cliché, or even Christian cliché, it's probably not the best thing to say. Statements that are better, "I'm so sorry for your loss;" "I'm here for you;" "How can I support you?" "Thank you for trusting me." Offer them support, not explanations for their tragedy.

Only mention a program last.

After you have listened, shown up several times, and communicated well, then and only then do you mention a support group, counselor or meeting. Present it as an option. Let them know it is their choice if they want to pursue it or not. And again encourage them and communicate that you are still there for them if they need you. You are not passing the buck, simply offering another resource if they are interested. If they accept the offer, you still need to maintain regular connection with them.

Tragedy is a part of life. It is during times of tragedy that we often need God's love and peace the most. Be present during these times. Resist the temptation to run. You will be glad that you did.

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