What to Say
When You Don’t
Know What to Say

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In one small European village was a town square that held a special statue. This statue was the pride and joy of the residents, but World War II arrived, and soon the bombs began falling on the town. One day the statue was hit and blown to pieces. The residents collected all the shattered pieces and slowly did what they could to rebuild it. When they finished the reconstruction of their beloved statue of Jesus, they noticed that the only pieces missing were the hands. So they placed a plaque at the base of the statue with these words: Now we are the only hands that Jesus has.

Isn’t this our calling to those around us? We are Jesus’ hands, as the apostle Paul told the Christians in Corinth: “Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves receive from God” (2 Corinthians 1:3-4).

Many years ago (more than I’d like to admit), I was serving as minister of education and youth. A man by the name of Alan Loy McGinnis attended our church while completing his graduate work. Since he was also a minister, he would preach from time to time in the evening services. One Sunday night he walked up to the pulpit and said, “Tonight I would like to share with you what to say, what not to say, what to do, and what not to do at a time of bereavement.”
Ours was not a note-taking congregation—until that moment. As I sat on the platform I could see people reaching for offering envelopes, prayer requests cards, or any other piece of paper they could find to write on. I still have my notes from that evening. It was the first (and unfortunately the last) time I’ve ever heard a message on how to help another person at a time of need. Those in attendance that evening left with a greater sense of confidence on how to help people.

Yes, we’ll be more likely to reach out if we know what to say. And yes, helping a hurting person can be a bit scary. So if we have the desire to reach out and help, why do we hesitate? Because we grapple with questions like “What do I say?” “What do I do?” “What should I avoid?” We want to do the right thing and say what will help, but we’re not sure what will accomplish that.

That’s where *What to Say When You Don’t Know What to Say* comes in! This easy-to-read book offers the knowledge, wisdom, and resources you need to confidently and competently help family, friends, and acquaintances when they need comfort and support.

**Help for You as Caregiver**

Before becoming significantly involved in helping others, you need to be aware of a problem that none of us are immune to. It has different names, including *compassion fatigue*, *helper shutdown*, or *helper burnout*, and it can happen to doctors, nurses, counselors, rescue workers, and anyone involved in helping others. It seems to be a case of emotional contagion—you end up catching the disorder of the person you’re helping. You become emotionally drained by caring too much. It’s stress from wanting to help another person. When you minister to a friend, he may leave feeling better, but now you’re absorbed in his problems emotionally as well as mentally.

This can happen for several reasons. It can be an overload if you’re helping a number of hurting individuals at the same time. The desire to help others is good, but you need to realize not everyone will be helped and there are some who aren’t willing to take the necessary steps to change. Some helpers end up with “mission failure” or they say, “I didn’t help them enough.” This won’t happen to you. The Person
bringing the changes about will be the Lord. So as you help, you also need to relinquish your friend to Jesus’ care and attention. Your value in helping others is to be there for them. You’ll be a more effective helper when you follow the helpful guidelines in this book, but don’t evaluate your success based on how well the person you’re helping responds. As a professional counselor for many years, I learned that sometimes helpers don’t get to see the results of our efforts as people move on. If you are too empathetic and feel what your friend is feeling too much, you will begin to carry his burdens around. That’s not your job. Remember, the person you’re helping is in God’s hands, not yours.

If you have unresolved trauma in your life, be prepared to have it activated when you work with someone who has experienced trauma. What you hear may hit close to home.

What will especially impact you is helping children who have experienced trauma. This happens to even the most experienced professional helpers.

What can you do? Make sure you maintain balance in your life. You need to allow time for tending to and nurturing yourself through the Word, healthy friendships, exercise, recreation, devotional reading, and laughter. You need to allow others to care for you too.

Sometimes you discover that helping certain friends is too draining. You feel empty after every encounter. Your friend may need assistance from someone other than you. Be aware of your thoughts. If you’re constantly thinking about your friend’s problems and you don’t relinquish his issues to the Lord, you could end up in difficulties yourself. Two resources you may want to read and recommend to those you help are my books Making Peace with Your Past and A Better Way to Think.

Despite these risks, helping people is a God-given calling that provides many opportunities for you to comfort and enrich the lives of those around you. When you actively participate with Him in this way, you too will be incredibly blessed.
When a family member or friend tells you about a difficult life situation, a tragic accident, or even a life-threatening illness, you want to help. You want to reach out and offer comfort and support. Sadly, how to best do that is an area not taught very often. And even when there are articles or classes on providing compassion, they’re usually cursory and unhelpful when it comes to real-life situations.

You’re not alone in your concern of how to help others. I know you don’t want to say or do the wrong thing and inadvertently hurt the people who come to you for help. And during a loss or crisis, you can’t really rely on them to tell you what they really need. They may not know or they may not have the energy it takes to tell you.

What can you say or do when someone comes to you…

• “I’ve just been told I have cancer…and it’s terminal.”
• “I just got a phone call. He’s dead…he’s been killed…my husband.”
• “My daughter just told me she’s been molested for three years.”
• “I was in the grocery store, and it was robbed. The gun went off. I can’t even think right now.”
• “I went to school to pick up my son, and he wasn’t there. They told me he was kidnapped!”
• “My husband just told me he wants a divorce. I’m shocked. I didn’t know anything was wrong.”
One day I was sitting at the kitchen table in my daughter’s home looking through a magazine while she fed her six-month-old daughter. The phone rang and Sheryl answered the call while continuing to feed her daughter. When she said, “Oh no. I’m so sorry to hear that. That must have been a shock,” my ears perked up. Being a counselor, I was intrigued so I continued to listen. It was apparent that her friend was in some kind of distress. I observed Sheryl while she listened and reflected back what she was hearing. She made statements like, “So you found the evidence, and that’s what led you to confront him” and “You’re sounding hurt and disappointed.” From time to time she asked questions: “Are any of your children aware of this?” and “How will she handle this at her stage in life?” She also asked, “Had you thought about this possibility?” and “Have you considered this?”

When her friend wasn’t sure or seemed to waver, Sheryl asked, “Is that really your responsibility at this time…or is it his?” She was helping her friend consider the best things to do and encouraging her to take the necessary steps. “You’ve given him more than a chance and trusted his word. Now it’s been broken. I think you know what to do.” Then she helped her friend explore several options as well as the possible consequences. On several occasions she reflected and clarified while her friend was thinking out loud. I could tell just from my daughter’s comments and expressions that her friend was devastated. I thought it was great that this caller had a trusted friend to talk to and help her work through this life-changing event.

My daughter wasn’t judgmental in any way as she assisted her friend in clarifying the problem. Her friend needed someone to give her support, someone to listen, someone to help her sort through the options, and someone to help her stabilize her life at that time. After Sheryl hung up, we talked about the situation for a while.

Sheryl made the comment, “I’m sure glad I’m not a counselor. I wouldn’t want to do this for a living.” I just looked at her, smiled, and said, “Oh sure. You’ve only done this for 15 years as a manicurist. You’ve helped as many women as some counselors have while you were sitting there doing their nails.” She laughed because it was true. She’s helped many people who would never go to a professional counselor
or a pastor. But her clients listened to Sheryl because of her listening ability, her insights, her experiences, and her desire to help. And people will listen to you too.

After more than forty years of being a counselor, I’m convinced that as many as one-third to one-half of all the people I’ve seen didn’t need to see me. That is, they wouldn’t have needed to see me if they’d had a trained pastor, lay caregiver, or knowledgeable friend to meet with. I’m all for professional counseling when it’s needed, but many issues can be resolved with the help of a friend who has learned the simple skills to help others. And, as Christians, ministering to people is part of our calling! Unfortunately, many people back off from this aspect because they don’t know what to say or do. That’s understandable, and I’m glad you want to solve that problem. Even as a long-time counselor I sometimes come across an issue I’m not sure how to handle. When that happens I do some research and talk to people to learn what I need so I can help.

When it comes to helping people, there’s more to it than just feeling comfortable talking and being knowledgeable about the particular subject involved. You need to understand that your friend—the person you’re helping—is probably not quite himself. He’s different. His thinking is affected. His behavior might be erratic. His emotions are probably off the scale. So how can you help your friend get back to normal? The primary requirement is caring. Harold Smith described the process so well:

Grief sharers always look for an opportunity to actively care. You can never “fix” an individual’s grief, but you can wash the sink full of dishes, listen to him or her talk, take his or her kids to the park. You can never “fix” an individual’s grief, but you can visit the cemetery with him or her.

Grief sharing is not about fixing—it’s about showing up. Coming alongside. Being interruptible. “Hanging out” with the bereaving. In the words of World War II veterans, “present and reporting for duty.”

The grief path is not a brief path. It’s a marathon, not a sprint.¹
What can you expect from a friend who is hurting? Actually, not very much. And the more his experience moves beyond loss and closer to crisis or trauma, the more this is true. Sometimes you’ll see a friend experiencing a case of the “crazies.” His responses seem irrational. He’s not himself. His behavior is different from or even abnormal compared to a person not going through a major loss. Just remember he’s reacting to an out-of-the-ordinary event. What he experienced is abnormal, so his response is actually quite normal. If what the person has experienced is traumatic, he may even exhibit some of the symptoms of Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD).

These are responses you can expect. Your friend is no longer functioning as he once did—and probably won’t for a while. And just because your friend is this way, he is not to be avoided. He needs you at this time. He needs friends to support and encourage him.

You Are Needed!

When a person experiences a sudden intrusion or disruption in her life, you are needed. If you or other friends aren’t available, the only person she has to talk with for guidance, support, and direction is herself. And who wants support from someone struggling with a case of the “crazies”?

A problem may arise if your friend doesn’t realize that she needs you… or doesn’t realize she needs you at this particular time. Your sensitivity is needed at this point. Remember, when your friend is hurting and facing a loss, you too are dealing with a loss. The relationship you had with your friend has changed. It’s not the same. It’s no longer equal. You may feel as though you’re the giver and your friend is the taker. Your relationship is off balance. The sharing the two of you had before has changed. The give-and-take you used to experience has vanished. What’s important to you doesn’t seem as important to your friend right now. Your life and experiences have taken a backseat to the present experiences of your friend.

Your friend in mourning—though he doesn’t perceive himself that way—is self-centered. You simply cannot exist for
him as a whole person, probably for a very long time. This can be hard on relationships. Friends get weary of ceasing to be perceived as human beings with feelings and problems and hopes in their own right. They get weary of being there for the other person in seemingly a one-sided relationship. But suffice it to say that your friend in mourning will not be able to empathize with you about things involving you for many months—or maybe years.²

And that’s okay even though it can be difficult. You can’t put a time limit on your role as a helper or giver. This may get old for you, especially when it stretches on for months. And remember that when your relationship gets back to normal, it will be a “new” normal. It won’t be the same. Sometimes a hurting friend ends up feeling resentful over being dependent on you while at the same time appreciating all you’ve done for her. And sometime your friend may do the same for you.

What Can You Do Right Now?

You can listen even when your friend isn’t talking. Sometimes she’s not able to talk, but your attentive presence lets her know you’re ready to listen. Let her know you want to hear her story when she’s up to talking about it.

If your friend is devastated and coming apart at the seams or sitting there stunned, you can’t make her feel better or “fix” her or the situation. When you try, it’s often to help you feel useful and relieve your anxiety of seeing someone in this state. We all tend to do that. Remember, you can never be all you want to be or all your friend wants you to be for her.³

What else can you expect? The world your friend experiences now won’t be your world. Often she will retreat into her world and not let you in. Because of what she’s going through, your activities may not seem as significant as they once did. You may reevaluate your own standards and values. Your family may see how your friend’s problems are changing you, and they may pressure you to back away from her. They want you back to normal.
Yes, you will be hurt at times since some of what you offer or do for your friend will be rejected. Because you haven’t experienced the same loss, she may feel uncomfortable with you—while at the same time she wants and asks for your help. Remember, your friend is not functioning normally. In your heart and mind, give her permission not to be as she was. If something is said or she didn’t respond how you expected, you may wonder, “Did I say something wrong? Am I off base?” The answer is no. You’re dealing with her unpredictability in the midst of her crisis. You are all right and doing fine.

You may be tempted at times to set your friend straight spiritually. You might hear her say, “I thought I could count on God, but even He let me down” or “How could a loving God let something like that happen?” You may even hear, “I think I’m losing my faith in God. I can’t even pray anymore.” Squelch your desire to quote Bible verses, recommend a specific spiritual book, or offer answers for why she may be interpreting the situation that way. Instead, be glad she’s sharing where she is spiritually. Respond with simple expressions of support: “Yes, what’s happened doesn’t make much sense, does it? It’s hard to understand. I wish I had an answer for you.” Or you can just listen and reflect back to her what you’re hearing.

There will be times when your friend doesn’t want you around. If you sense that might be the case, ask, “What would be more comfortable for you at this time—for me to be here with you or for me to give you some space? I can do either.” Let your friend know that you won’t be offended if she doesn’t want you there. If your presence isn’t needed, gently say, “I’ll check back with you another time to see what I can do to assist you,” and then quietly leave. She is not rejecting you. She’s dealing with her crisis the best she can and just needs some space.

And since no one is a mind reader, there will be times when you don’t have any idea what your friend needs. Let her know it’s all right for her to tell you specifically, even if it’s just saying, “I don’t know.”
You’re going to read this next statement several times in this book because of its importance: *The best support you can give your friend is to normalize her feelings.* This simply means reassuring her that what she is experiencing is normal and natural. She isn’t crazy, and she isn’t going crazy. This assurance may provide the greatest relief of all. To give it, however, means *you* need to understand what someone usually experiences from loss or trauma. (We’ll discuss trauma specifically in chapters 6 and 7.)

**Biblical Wisdom for Helping**

How can you help a friend? There are many elements involved. Proverbs 3:5-6 instructs us to “lean on, trust in, and be confident in the Lord with all your heart and mind and do not rely on your own insight or understanding. In all your ways know, recognize, and acknowledge Him, and He will direct and make straight and plain your paths” (AMP). A similar thought is found in Proverbs 15:28: “The mind of the [uncompromisingly] righteous studies how to answer, but the mouth of the wicked pours out evil things” (AMP, brackets in original).

Even with all their years of training and experience, professional counselors frequently wonder what they should do or say. This experience prompts all of us to go “back to the need.” You’ll find yourself there time and time again. If you assist your friend out of your own strength, mistakes will be made. We all need to rely on the power and wisdom of God.

Helping others includes experiencing genuine interest and love for them. You can rely on the power of God for that love. If it’s not there, you can’t fake it. Your friends will know if you are. “Oil and perfume rejoice the heart; so does the sweetness of a friend’s counsel that comes from the heart” (Proverbs 27:9 AMP). It’s so easy to toss off an answer or response that’s superficial, but it won’t meet your friend’s need. And because it doesn’t deal with the problem she’ll be disappointed. Ask yourself, “How do I really feel about this person who needs help? Am I
genuinely concerned?” If you aren’t, pray about the situation and your attitude. Perhaps you’re not the one supposed to help. You’ll be drawn to help some and not others. It could be their problems are beyond you, overwhelm you, or activate unresolved issues in your life.

**Communicating Gently**

To help someone, you need to know when to speak and when enough has been said:

In a multitude of words transgression is not lacking, but he who restrains his lips is prudent (Proverbs 10:19 AMP).

Don’t talk so much. You keep putting your foot in your mouth. Be sensible and turn off the flow! (10:19 TLB).

He who belittles and despises his neighbor lacks sense, but a man of understanding keeps silent (Proverbs 11:12 AMP).

The smart person says very little, and one with understanding stays calm (Proverbs 17:27 NCV).

Even fools seem to be wise if they keep quiet; if they don’t speak, they appear to understand (17:28 NCV).

Do you see a man who is hasty in his words? There is more hope for a [self-confident] fool than for him (29:20 AMP, brackets in original).

Being hasty means you blurt out what you’re thinking without considering the effect it might have on others. If you’re an extrovert, you probably need to talk while thinking something through. Extroverts tend to speak first and then realize what they’ve said later. When you’re ministering to a hurting friend and he shares something that shocks you, don’t feel you have to respond immediately. This might be a time to hold back and get your thoughts in order. I’ve heard people say, “You did what?” in response to someone, and it immediately shut down communication. Instead, take a few moments to pray and ask God to give you the best words. Then formulate what you want to say carefully.
You could say, “Give me some time to respond to that” or “I need a few minutes to go through what you said.” This takes the pressure off you and your friend.

Another passage that reflects the idea of understanding is Proverbs 25:20 (NCV): “Singing songs to someone who is sad is like taking away his coat on a cold day or pouring vinegar on soda.” Being joyful, making sarcastic comments, telling jokes, or making statements like “Snap out of it” are inappropriate when someone is deeply hurting and suffering. Your friend needs to know that being emotional in difficult situations is normal, and you’re okay with it.

If you don’t know what to say, one of the best things to do is ask for information: “Tell me more about it” or “What are you thinking about this?”

Timing is yet another important communication consideration. “A man has joy making an apt answer, and a word spoken at the right moment—how good it is!” (Proverbs 15:23 AMP). A wise response or answer needs to be spoken at the right moment to be heard and accepted. “A word fitly spoken and in due season is like apples of gold in settings of silver” (Proverbs 25:11 AMP).

Being Discreet but Thinking Safety

Keeping confidences is foundational to helping people. Do you keep a confidence when a friend shares something with you? This adage applies to your friend as well as to you: “Gossips can’t keep secrets, so avoid people who talk too much” (Proverbs 20:19 NCV). “Gossips can’t keep secrets, but a trustworthy person can” (11:13 NCV). Undoubtedly most of us have had the temptation to share an interesting tidbit about someone with others. Yes, even confidences from friends. And the more shocking it is, the more we’re tempted to share. But such conversation is a violation of trust and friendship. Tremendous damage can be done, especially when your friend is in such a vulnerable state. “He who guards his mouth and his tongue keeps himself from troubles” (Proverbs 21:23 AMP). So when you’re told sensitive information, use your best judgment about confidentiality. Ask God to help you bury confidential information deep inside or you can give it to the Lord and
let it go so it won’t be on the tip of your tongue. Remember, your friend is in an emotional state and might not guard what she says as much as she usually would. If you’re unsure, ask your friend whether the information is okay to share with her family or other friends.

There are some circumstances and situations that cancel the usual confidentiality principles. If your friend is self-harming, suicidal, or threatening harm to someone else, get immediate help and make sure everyone stays safe.

**Offering Advice**

On many occasions all of us have struggled and friends have given us advice—some good, some not so good. And sometimes the advice was good but not what we needed at that time. In fact, it’s possible we could receive five different viewpoints if we asked five different people. Then we’re left wondering, *What do I do now? Whose advice should I follow?*

If you have suggestions for someone struggling, give them in tentative form so the person can choose or have input. “What if you did…?” “Have you considered…?” “What possibilities have you come up with?” A safety factor you can employ if you’re going to give advice is to give several alternatives. Don’t say to a person, “This is what you need to do.” If you do that, you assume responsibility for the solution and outcome, and if your suggestion doesn’t work, the person may come back and say, “You really gave me stupid advice. It didn’t work, and made things worse. It’s your fault.” Offering several suggestions in a tentative way not only is safer for you, but it also helps your friend think through the scenarios better. Most people have the ability to resolve their problems, but they often need the encouragement to do so.

**Considering Confrontation**

One of the ways of helping a friend is gentle confrontation when you see him heading down the wrong path. Confrontation is not attacking the person. He may already be feeling guilty and ashamed so for him to experience judgment or condemnation rather than a gentle nudge seems like nothing less than rejection.
Confronting another person should only be considered when you’ve experienced empathy for the person. “Confrontation” is an \textit{act of grace}. It’s done to reveal discrepancies or distortions in someone’s intended direction or thinking. Confrontation is also used to challenge and strengthen underdeveloped and unused skills and resources of your friend.

Your purpose in confronting your friend is to help him make better decisions for himself, become more accepting of where he is in life, and be less destructive and more productive. “Wounds from a friend can be trusted, but an enemy multiplies kisses” (Proverbs 27:6). “A rebuke impresses a discerning person more than a hundred lashes a fool” (Proverbs 17:10).

Remember, you can’t use the same approach for every person. You need to be sensitive to the person’s needs and personality. Your adaptability is important. “We earnestly beseech you, brethren, admonish (warn and seriously advise) those who are out of line…encourage the timid and fainthearted, help and give your support to the weak souls, [and] be very patient with everybody [always keeping your temper]” (1 Thessalonians 5:14 AMP, brackets in original).

How do you confront with grace? Not with anger or with a statement that casts judgment. You may want to point out that what someone is doing is irresponsible or even dumb, but you’ll offend and even sever the relationship by doing that. Your friend needs to hear care and concern in your voice. Confrontation should be done in a soft manner with statements such as, “I wonder if…” “Could it be…?” “Is it possible…?” “Does this make sense to you?” and “How do you react to this perception?” Using questions, lead the person to what you want him to consider. Practice asking the questions out loud again and again until they’re a comfortable part of your helping reservoir of wise approaches.

\textbf{Offering Help and Hope}

Another principle we find in the Word of God is helping and edifying. Some of these passages might be familiar to you. “Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ” (Galatians 6:2). “Let us then definitely aim for and eagerly pursue what makes for
harmony and for mutual upbuilding (edification and development) of one another” (Romans 14:19 AMP). The word *edify*, which is part of helping, means “to hold up or to promote growth in Christian wisdom, grace, virtue, and holiness.” Helping includes edification. Helping means “assisting a person to do something for her betterment.” Ask yourself, “Is what I’m sharing with that person going to cause her to grow in Christ and assist her to be strong?” A friend might come to you and say, “I really want you to help me.” What does she mean by *help*? She might mean agreeing with her point of view or even taking her side. That is where you can get into difficulty. You want to avoid taking sides.

Another way of helping others is giving encouragement. “Anxiety in a man’s heart weighs it down, but an encouraging word makes it glad” (Proverbs 12:25 AMP). “Encourage (admonish, exhort) one another and edify (strengthen and build up) one another, just as you are doing” (1 Thessalonians 5:11 AMP). The *American Heritage Dictionary* offers one of the better definitions of *encourage*: “tendency or disposition to expect the best possible outcome, or to dwell on the most hopeful aspect of a situation.” When this is your attitude or perspective, you’ll be able to encourage others. Encouragement is “to inspire; to continue on a chosen course; to impart courage or confidence.” Encouragement is recognizing the other person as having worth and dignity. It means paying attention to her when she is sharing with you. It’s listening to her in a way that lets her know she’s being listened to. “When Apollos wanted to go to Achaia, the brothers and sisters *encouraged* him and wrote to the disciples there to welcome him” (Acts 18:27). The word *encourage* here means “to urge forward or persuade.” In 1 Thessalonians 5:11, which I just shared with you, *encourage* means “to stimulate another person to the ordinary duties of life.”

Scripture uses a variety of words to describe both our involvement with others as well as the actual relationship. *Urge* (Greek, *parakaleo*) means to “beseech or exhort.” It is intended to create an environment of urgency to listen and respond to a directive. It is a mildly active verb Paul used: “I *urge* you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship” (Romans 12:1) and “I always
thank my God for you because of his grace given you in Christ Jesus” (1 Corinthians 1:4).

The word encourage (Greek, *paramutheomai*) means “to console, comfort, and cheer up.” This process includes elements of understanding, redirecting thoughts, and a general shifting of focus from the negative to the positive. In the context of the verse, it refers to the timid individual who is discouraged and ready to give up. It’s a matter of loaning your faith and hope to the person until her own develops.

*Help* (Greek, *anechomai*) primarily consists of “taking interest in, being devoted to, rendering assistance, or holding up spiritually and emotionally.” It is not so much active involvement as a passive approach. It suggests the idea of coming alongside a person and supporting her. “We urge you, brothers and sisters, warn those who are idle and disruptive, encourage the disheartened, help the weak, be patient with everyone” (1 Thessalonians 5:14). In the context of that verse, *help* seems to refer to those who are incapable of helping themselves.

Hebrews 3:13 says we’re to “encourage one another daily.” In the setting of this verse, *encouragement* is associated with protecting a believer from callousness. Hebrews 10:25 refers to “encouraging one another.” This time *encouraging* means to keep someone on her feet who, if left to herself, would collapse. Your encouragement serves like the concrete pilings of a structural support.

Involvement and empathy are the scriptural basis for helping, and empathy is one of the most important commodities for helping. It’s viewing the situation through your friend’s eyes and feeling as she feels. The scriptural admonition to bear one another’s burdens and rejoice with those who rejoice and weep with those who weep reveals empathy (Galatians 6:2; Romans 12:15).

Empathy involves discrimination, the ability to distinguish through discernment how the other person is looking at the world. You want to get inside the other person and see the world through her perspective or frame of reference to get a feeling for what her world is like. You also want to communicate to your friend this understanding in such a manner that she realizes you have picked up on her feelings and, to some extent, her behavior. This is a learned skill. Be patient with yourself as
you develop this ability. You want to see with your friend’s eyes what her world is like. For instance, it’s being able to see another person’s joy, to understand what underlies that joy, and to communicate this understanding to the person. Can you do this? Yes!

One of my favorite true stories that describes how significant a person’s presence can be in the life of another comes from a doctor:

Barbara received another three courses of chemotherapy, but the tumor seemed to shrug off the drugs. The deposits grew in her liver and in her bones. She lost weight and spent most of the time in bed. After the last cycle of chemotherapy, I admitted her to the hospital with a high fever. Antibiotics stemmed an early bacterial infection.

As Barbara slowly recovered from the infection, I told myself I knew of no drugs, either standard or experimental, that stood a real chance of ameliorating her condition. The time had come for me to tell her.

I chose to visit in the early evening, when the hubbub of the hospital had settled down, so there would be less chance of distraction and interruption. Barbara greeted me warmly, as she always did. I moved a chair close to the bedside and grasped her hand. She returned the gesture, but it had little force. After we chatted for a short time about several articles in the day’s newspaper, I began to break the bad news.

“Barbara, we’ve known each other for well over a year, and we’ve been honest with each other every step of the way.”

Briefly, her lips trembled, and then she regained her composure. Her eyes told me she knew what I was about to say.

“I know of no medicine that I can give at this point to help you.”

We sat in heavy silence.

Barbara shook her head. “No, Jerry,” she said. “You do have something to give. You have the medicine of friendship.”
Be open to God’s leading at this time. May the words of a man who gave his life for others on September 11, 2001, at the World Trade Center guide you:

Lord, take me where You want me to go,
Let me meet whom You want me to meet.
Help me to say what You want me to say.
And keep me from getting in Your way!\(^5\)

*Father Mychal Judge*