

## HOW TO BE A FAITHFUL FRIEND DURING THE HARDEST SEASONS OF LIFE

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As I reflect on friendship in the midst of grief there are certain memories that rise to the surface. These moments inserted beauty into the bitterness of my pain and I am forever grateful.

I will never forget the moment that Laura took me to lunch after three months of seclusion since the death of my baby girl. I was trying my hardest to be a friend like I remembered, though on the inside I wanted to get in the car, drive back home and pull the covers over my head. I mustered all the energy I had to say, "So how are you doing?" My dear friend said to me, sweetly yet sternly, "We're not doing that Katie - this season of life is about you." I crumbled. She didn't need anything from me. She gave me permission to be as lost on the outside as I was on the inside. Every year Laura sends my children a special book in honor of Anna on her birthday. I feel safe with Laura.

Another memory comes to mind. Monica had no idea what to say to me. She felt inadequate in her ability to comfort and console me. But Monica didn't need to say anything more than the couple sentences she repeated over and over for a year. "I am so sorry. I love you so much." She was comfortable to sit in the agony of silent suffering with me time and time again. It's been nearly nine years since the loss of my daughter. Monica had a daughter last year. In her baby's nursery is a framed picture of my daughter. I feel safe with Monica.

Kristen is my sister. Kristen rearranged her entire life for me. Though she had three little girls at home, I became her fourth and whatever I needed took precedence over whatever was going on in her life. I *was* her agenda. Kristen embodied sacrifice for me. Nine years later... I am *still* her agenda during my seasons of grief. I feel safe with Kristen.

How do you best love and support someone who is grieving or suffering? This question has appeared in my inbox, in comments from blog readers and in more conversations than I could possibly count. It's an important question - a question with a complex answer worth its weight in gold.

If you want to love someone well who is hurting then you really need to understand and commit yourself to the word **faithful**. My favorite definition is "steadfast in affection or allegiance - loyal." I was blessed to have a handful of faithful friends in my life that knit themselves to me and made the decision to become a part of my survival and eventually my reconstruction. I shudder to think of where I would be without the faithfulness of these dear ones.

**A faithful friend** makes a choice to enter the pain for the long haul and not just a season.

**A faithful friend** allows your suffering to affect their life. They allow their own lives and agendas to be changed as a result of your loss. You will not hear a faithful friend say, "This is unfair to me to have to be stretched, uncomfortable or to make certain sacrifices."

**A faithful friend** does not become easily offended when phone calls and emails go unreturned... even if months pass. A faithful friend recognizes that suffering is a game changer in relationship. They stand by faithfully without judging or accusing and without needing anything in return. They understand that this pain is life altering and they do not have the same expectations for the friendship that they did before.

**A faithful friend** listens and doesn't try to fix it. A faithful friend can simply say, "I'm so sorry, I wish I could take your pain away, I'm not going anywhere," for the millionth time. A faithful friend can sit in your pain comfortable with her own silence and inability to save you.

**A faithful friend** is a student of your pain. They ask permission to "go there" and respect your desire not to. They say, "I want to love you well and I'm not sure exactly what that looks like for you. I'm going to do my best but recognize there will be moments when I say the wrong thing or miss an opportunity to support you. Please tell me when I've hurt you and please tell me what I can do differently or better for your particular needs." No one is a pro at grief support. Education from the person you're supporting is crucial.

**A faithful friend** initiates conversations and talks about the person who has died. I cannot begin to express how comforted and loved I feel just to hear the sound of my Anna's name from someone else's lips.

**A faithful friend** doesn't try to equate their past pain with yours. For example, "I know exactly how you feel because..." Empathizing and validating statements are a much better route. These are statements like: "I know our pain and losses are so different and I certainly can't imagine how your pain must feel. I remember feeling (angry, lost, and helpless) when I endured a crisis in my life. How is it for you?"

**A faithful friend** knows when to cry with you and knows when to be strong. There were certainly moments when all I wanted to do was cry in someone's lap and feel that they were adding their grief to mine. This made me feel like I had partners in my pain and not just counselors. But friends who seemed exhausted by my pain made me feel like I was a horrible burden. Knowing how to strike this balance is tricky. Communicate with your friend. Ask what she needs and tell her that she is not a burden.

**A faithful friend** defends you to others who are less gracious and compassionate to your loss. A faithful friend educates those who are offended by the changes, are confused by your decisions or lack empathy.

**A faithful friend** remembers the dates, the little and big ones and they call, they write and they honor your pain and your loss. A faithful friend knows that the anticipation of grief is sometimes harder than the anniversary itself. A faithful friend reaches out weeks before the anniversary days and holidays.

**A faithful friend** calls to say things like, "I was thinking of your Anna today and started crying. I miss her. How are you doing lately?" They share the grief instead of just apologizing for yours. They ask questions long after the loss and realize that even when things seem okay, that they may not be.

As I end this post, I find myself overcome with gratitude. It's been a long road and I have had many partners along the way. **Faithful friends**, you have loved me well, forgiven me much, and the transformation of who I have become in and through suffering is largely due to you. I am a richer, fuller, person because of your love and it is my honor to extend all you have taught to me to others in need.

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Long after you have come to terms with your loss, you may still be holding a grudge against others for what they have said to you or failed to say to you, during your grieving time. To understand why they acted as they did you need only remember what it was like before this tragedy in your life, and how you treated friends who had experienced the death of a loved one. What did you do? How often did you visit them or encourage them to talk about their grief? If you did very little, or did whatever you did with a feeling of awkwardness, you can perhaps appreciate more fully the less-than-adequate behavior of your friends in your time of need. This is not to justify their behavior but only to explain it.

Many well-meaning companions honestly don't know what to do to help you through your time of grief. They're afraid to say the wrong thing, or they may think the less said the better. Because bereaved persons are not usually the most consistent people around, others may be a bit hesitant to attempt to reach out to you. How much courage does it take for you, as the bereaved, to tell people what you need so they can respond appropriately? One of your most difficult, yet necessary tasks will be to assume the role of educator in this process. In order to get what you need you must be willing to create the possibility for it to happen, by speaking directly and clearly about what is helpful to you.

How nice it would be if people were already willing and able to give you whatever you need. But such support is rare. Still, most of your friends do have the potential to be helpful and, given a few guidelines, can be a real asset to you.

Try to remember:

- Your friends DO care about you.
- They DO want to help.
- They CAN be educated.
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Don't give up on your friends when they make a mistake (and they probably will!) You have already lost enough.

Peace to you.