

# Responding to the Suffering of Others

## Needs of the Suffering

One of the hardest parts of caregiving work – or life, for that matter – is being asked to help someone whose particular form of suffering we have not experienced ourselves, perhaps one that triggers our deepest fears – for example, the sudden death of a child. How can we respond to a young father’s pain when we don’t even want to imagine what he is going through? What can we possibly offer him?

My experience is that each of us has the same needs when we are suffering. We all need to have our suffering and emotional pain validated. We need to feel safe speaking about and expressing our pain, and to trust that others will understand our feelings. We need to feel that whatever our experience and circumstances, we are respected and unconditionally accepted.

We all need basic human qualities – the reliable presence and love of another person, someone willing to be in regular contact with us for the duration of our journey through suffering. We need others to simply listen and bear witness to our pain, offering support, encouragement, and honesty, tempered with compassion.

## The Compassionate Spirit of Love

What helps us endure suffering are frequent expressions of affection, love and hugs; sometimes we need laughter to lighten our pain. We need time to withdraw and heal our wounds, balanced with encouragement to take steps back into life’s enjoyable activities. We need friends who can sometimes offer new ideas or perspectives, without any expectations attached.

And we all need to be reminded that our suffering and painful circumstances do not constitute a new “tragic” identity. We need others to view us always as a whole person, facing another of life’s transitions. If others can respond to our needs with courage and love, this gives us hope that we can bear our suffering with dignity.

When a friend is in tremendous emotional or physical pain, sometimes we’re afraid to go and be with him or her, or afraid to communicate honestly when we visit. We think we should know how to relieve his pain or have just the right things to say. Yet what a person suffering needs most is our presence. The Greek word for comforter is *paraclete*, meaning ‘one who comes to walk alongside.’ What we bring to support a friend is our loving presence, with perspective.

## ‘How We Are’

More than anything we do or say, what helps a person who is suffering is how we are. ‘How we are’ is a reflection of the unified perspective we have on the whole of life, which includes experiences of joy and adversity. Our presence is also an expression of our confidence, the profound love and unqualified respect for others we have come to embody through our spiritual practice. ‘How we are’ is connected to our awareness of our own suffering and the extent to which we have worked through our grief. And finally, our loving presence depends on our ability to acknowledge and then release our fears and expectations, remaining receptive and compassionate towards the other person.

You can obtain valuable insights for responding to another person's suffering from your own experience. Take some time to reflect upon a period in your life when you went through a deep experience of suffering, loss or grief. Remember what it was you really needed during that time. Recall what helped you to face and heal your pain, and what resources – internal or external – you called on for help. Or if you never received what you most needed, reflect on what you wished for to help you get through your painful distress.

Finally you might ask yourself: What benefit did this suffering bring to my life? Can I appreciate now that my suffering played a purposeful role in my development? Was I able to give a meaning to my difficulty by the way I chose to respond?

Reflecting on your own experiences of deep suffering will enable you to realize that you have all the necessary skills for supporting others, the confidence that suffering is not hopeless, and an appreciation that suffering presents us with an opportunity to change or find meaning in the midst of our adversity.

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