

## REMEMBERING THE HEART IN TURBULENT TIMES

In the overwhelm of this global crisis, it is easy to forget that our deep human experiences need as much attention as our external world. Now more than ever, matters of the soul can easily be left in the chaos. The physical distress we see is often accompanied with spiritual distress that we may not see. Here are the most important ways you can nurture your own heart and support the hearts of others. Anyone can do it, whether you have five minutes or five hours.

The greatest gift we can give another is our full and heartfelt presence. The elements of presence described below have had a significant impact on grief outcomes and on how resilient a person can be during crises.

- **Remember there is a person behind the diagnosis** with complicated emotions and needs that go beyond the physical. Our job is to create connection and not lose who they are in the situation.
- **It is not your job to fix the grief experience of another.** Once we realize that, it is much easier to sit in the presence of another's pain.
- **Use body language that conveys openness.** Sit eye level and make eye contact when you can. Keep your arms and heart physically open. Be aware of your facial expressions in response to their physical or emotional state.
- **Ask questions.** Sometimes someone can feel lost in an experience and need someone to lead. Simply asking *"What does your heart need most right now,"* or *"What has this been like for you?"* can create an opportunity for emotional processing.
- **Listen with compassion.** Being heard, being seen and being understood without judgment is often the most meaningful form of support someone can receive. Allow them to share stories of either this experience or others.
- **Validate and normalize feelings.** Help them understand that what they are feeling is normal for the experience they are going through. Use statements like *"I'm sorry this is so scary right now"* or simply *"I hear you."*
- **Bring them back to the present moment.** Their mind can wander to worst case scenarios. Asking *"How are you doing right now?"* can ground them. Gently reminding someone that they are safe (if they are) and not alone is helpful in a crisis.
- **Express Value.** With an unprecedented number of individuals in our healthcare system today, it is easy for someone to feel like a statistic. Reinforce the value of one's life without trying to change their current feelings.
- **Remind people they are not alone,** that you will do your best to make sure they are comfortable and will get what they need as they move through this process. People can feel isolated when they are alone or when they are with others who are not acknowledging them. Isolation can increase anxiety, fear and existential distress.

- **Silence—sometimes saying nothing is best.** A compassionate expression or a gentle touch can go a long way in bridging connection.
- **Take action when appropriate.** Small helpful acts may be as simple as getting someone a blanket, offering to pray with them (if appropriate), or helping them learn how to use Facetime. Our actions do not have to be big. It isn't about what we do, but the heart in which we do it with.
- **Relate authentically.** It's okay to cry. Or not! Tears may express our connection and understanding but it is not okay to have a 'meltdown' with a patient, causing a role reversal and taking the focus away from them.
- **Resource.** Remember you are not alone either. You may not be aware of other resources as they become available. Call on your organization or other organizations to help people find needed services, equipment, connections and important support like palliative care and hospice.
- **Spiritual problems can be opportunities to find meaning,** according to their belief systems, in the darkest hours. Trust that people will find their way.

### **Remember YOUR Heart In The Process**

**In times of crisis, our professional skills and regard for self has the potential to get buried in responsibility and fatigue, eventually leading to burn out. Please remember:**

- **Take care of yourself.** Exercise intentional self-care. Self-care is a key feature in your ability to show up for others. Consider physical outlets like yoga and exercise. Use practices that support you spiritually, emotionally and mentally such as – meditation, connecting with community and being in nature. Self-care should be both things you can do 'later' AND ways you can stop and remember yourself in the middle of the day – a deep breath, a prayer, a moment of gratitude, a thought of hope. Stay grounded and stay centered as best as possible while paying attention to signs of compassion fatigue.
- **Emotional awareness.** Carrying the weight of someone else's grief or despair does not take it away from them; it makes your burden heavier and you, less effective. When you leave someone's side, make a conscious choice to let them go. When you are through with work, make a conscious choice to focus on other things. Make a ritual of walking through the door. Draw clear lines. Setting boundaries is not unkind or neglectful; it is a mature self-care skill that gives us the resilience to be present, to take right actions and to make meaningful connections during a crisis.

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