



It Helps to Have Friends Who Will Listen

When I ask you to listen to me and you start giving me advice, you have not done what I asked.

When I ask you to listen to me and you begin to tell me why I shouldn't feel that way, you are trampling on my feelings.

When I ask you to listen to me and you feel you have to do something to solve my problems, you have failed me, strange as that may seem.

Listen! All I asked was that you listen, not talk or do—just hear me.

Advice is cheap; twenty-five cents will get you both Dear Abbey and Billy Graham in the same newspaper.

And I can do for myself. I'm not helpless. Maybe discouraged and faltering, but not helpless.

When you do something for me that I can and need to do for myself, you contribute to my fear and inadequacy.

But when you accept as a simple fact that I do feel what I feel, no matter how irrational, then I can quit trying to convince you and get behind this business of understanding what's behind the irrational feeling.

And when that's clear, the answers are obvious and I don't need advice. Irrational feelings make sense when we understand what's behind them.

Perhaps that's why prayer works, sometimes, for some people...because God is mute and doesn't give advice or try to fix things.

God just listens and lets you try to work it out for yourself.

So please listen and just hear me.

And if you want to talk, wait a minute for your turn...and I'll listen to you.

Author unknown.

he isn't coming back, but I refuse to accept or approve it!" Every person in every group I have talked with since agrees with Ann.

Acknowledging a loss is the most important step of your recovery. It is at this point that you will again take full charge of your life and full responsibility for your feelings. A noticeable sense of balance is coming back into your life when you can acknowledge that your loss is real—and permanent. It represents a

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giant step toward full recovery.

If you have had a loss through death or divorce, you will probably be ready to acknowledge your loss fully in about three to six months. However, if it takes you a year or more to get to this point, you won't be the first. Nor will it mean you aren't doing as well as someone else. Everyone reaches this stage of grief at his or her own pace.

When Rae joined our grief support group, it had been eighteen months since her husband's death. When asked why she had decided to join at this particular time, she replied, "I thought I was doing fine. I handled the funeral okay and went to work shortly afterward. I was lonely at times, especially in the evenings. But all in all I thought I was doing pretty well. In the last month, it's as if I'm right back at the beginning. I didn't cry the first time around, but now I cry all the time."

Rae had not been ready to acknowledge her husband's death "the first time around." Now she was. It was important for Rae to see she was not going backward, but forward, because she was crying now. She wasn't "worse" than she had been for eighteen months, she was *better*. She was ready to move on. In the months that followed, she did just that.

If you have never endured a major loss in your life, you may not be able to understand the depth of pain that acknowledging such a loss can bring. My wife June has had two major surgeries, both of which were in response to life-threatening illnesses. Both surgical procedures made lifetime changes in her physical body. I have had back surgery once. There was no threat to my life. In fact, the quality of my life was improved by the procedure. I can remain naïve about facing the possibility of my death. June cannot.

Her feelings of complete vulnerability going into surgery are different than my experience.

Grief is like that. It takes you into new territory. When I first started meeting with a group of widows, I had to say to them, "You are the experts here. I am an amateur. My parents have died, my brother-in-law died at age six, I have moved to a strange city and all my children have left home. These losses I can understand. But I don't know what it feels like to have my spouse die, and furthermore, I don't want to know! You will have to tell me about that experience and I will try to understand." Twenty years and countless grief-support-group meetings later, I am still listening and trying to understand. When my wife was diagnosed with breast cancer and we waited to see if it had spread, it was as if the door to the experience of losing her was opened just a crack. For a few days I could see just a tiny bit of what it would feel like if she died. I probably learned more in those few days than in all the years of careful listening to those who fully experienced that nightmare.

There is nothing easy about saying "I am divorced" or "My child is dead" or "This part of my life is over." It hurts! But it won't hurt forever. Emotional pain is another sign of your progress toward a full life. It is important at this point of your recovery to remind yourself—often—that you will not always feel as you do at this moment.

This is an up-and-down phase.

You will be tempted to slip back into denial of what has happened. You can do that periodically and you will feel better—for a little while. But the only pathway to balance and wholeness lies through the pain of the acknowledgment of your loss.

A support group or professional counseling can help a lot in this phase of your recovery. People around you will ask, "How are you?" They expect to hear that you are "fine," regardless of how you actually feel. If you *aren't* fine and you tell the truth, many people will ignore your words and behave as though you hadn't said a thing. Then you may feel worse than you did before.

A counselor or a support group can give you the opportunity to talk freely and get your feelings off your chest. You can be sure