

WHAT TO SAY WHEN YOU DON'T KNOW WHAT TO SAY



A Guide for Helping Others
Through Tough Times



The American Association
of Christian Counselors

Have you ever found yourself at a loss for words when someone begins to share something hard with you? Wondering how to provide comfort, guidance, empathy, or inspiration when it matters most?

One of the most common things I hear is “*I just don’t know what to say...*” Believe me, even with years of training and experience, hearing personal stories of pain, conflict, anguish, confusion, or heartbreak is never easy. Regardless of your level of training, it can be overwhelming when someone close to you is experiencing tough or challenging times. Have you ever been with someone, and they share something like:

- *I just feel so depressed and hopeless.*
- *My spouse is going to leave me. What am I going to do? What do I tell the kids?*
- *The credit card bills are piling up. I lost my job, and I have no idea what to do.*
- *I’m so scared, my mom’s cancer is back.*

All these examples are personal and very real. But how do you adequately respond to someone sharing these felt needs with you?

There is no better example of knowing what to do and say than Jesus himself. An example of this comes from John 9 where Jesus heals a man born blind. In this passage, Jesus showed us how to care and help someone in need. First, he relieved the physical suffering of the man. Second, He revealed Himself as the Light of the World. The way Jesus responded to the man in John 9 is consistent throughout His

earthly ministry and paints a “how to” for us to respond to anyone in distress.

Practical Steps

1. Be Present.

It is easy to get worked up and try to come up with a profound statement or advice that makes everything better in that moment. The truth is that’s not why the person is sharing it with you. Most often, they just want to be heard and have a place to share what has been weighing heavy on them.

- Make time for the conversation and don’t be rushed.
- Maintain eye contact and positive body language.
- Put away devices that can be distracting.

2. Create a Space for Difficult Conversations

Hearing people share their stories and experiences can be difficult. Sometimes we just do not know what to say, and that is okay. Acknowledge that what the person is sharing with you is difficult, and not the way it is supposed to be.

- Allow time for silence when necessary.
- Affirm the difficulty the person is experiencing.
- Try to avoid comparing situations to another one.
- Don’t push or pry, instead, allow them to share at their own time and pace.
- Be supportive

3. Use Active Listening Techniques.

The biggest mistake anyone can make is trying to immediately fix a situation. What the person needs from you right now is a shoulder to lean on and an ear to hear. In these moments, the person will remember what to do more than what you say.

- Be patient and stay focused.
- Face the person and keep eye contact.
- Repeat what you hear by asking clarifying questions.
- “Listen” and look for non-verbal cues such as facial expressions and body language.
- Listen without judgement and don’t try to prepare what to say next.
- Empathize, do not discredit.

4. Use Biblical Scripture When Appropriate.

The Word of God is extremely comforting, but in moments of distress or crisis, be careful in how you use Scripture. For example, if someone shares that a family member recently passed away, that may not be the best time to quote Romans 8:28 that “*all things work together for good.*” Instead, offer to pray for the person if they are open to it.

- Use verses to encourage, not to give an answer.
- Remind them that there is hope.
- Remind them that God is with them even in their darkest moments.

5. Help Them Find Professional Support.

If the person is open to receiving professional help, offer to help them look for providers or make an appointment for them. Getting professional care is a big step and can seem

overwhelming. Remind them that it is not a sign of weakness or a sin to ask for help.

- Create a list of vetted Christian mental health professionals in your area.
- Find local support groups in your Church or community.
- Offer to help with everyday chores or responsibilities.

What to Say and *What Not to Say*

Great Examples of Responses

- *“I care about you, and I am here for you.”*
- *“How can I help you right now?”*
- *“I know it must have been hard to share with me, I am so proud of you.”*
- *“I’m always here if you would like to talk. I also know of a few professional counselors; may I give you their phone numbers?”*

Avoid Saying Things Like:

- *“Why are you so worried?”*
- *“I totally get that.”*
- *“Everything is going to be okay.”*
- *“Have you prayed about it?”*
- *“You need to.....”*
- *“I know exactly how you feel.”*

We hope that this resource has been helpful. Would you like to gain more wisdom and skill in caring for others? Do you want to learn how to use the Bible to minister to those who are in need, who might be hurting, or are in distress?

If you answered yes to any of these questions, you are ready to be trained to be even more effective in helping others through tough times. We encourage you to consider the AACC free mental health coaching course that we offer.

[Click here to claim your free course!](#)

God's blessings to you!

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