

Caring for others



The story of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10:30-35 tells us what Jesus wants us to understand about caring for others. The details in Jesus' stories are always significant: the Samaritan responded readily with pity for the injured man; he gave first aid in binding his wounds, transported him to shelter and attended to him personally with food and water, watching over him through the night. Before leaving next day, he ensured the continuation of his recovery, by providing two silver coins to the innkeeper. All this for a complete stranger! The parable shows us that caring needs to be practical, personal, kind and thoughtful, with an eye to the future well-being of the needy person. This story challenges us every time we read it – are we prepared to go to such lengths to care for those around us who are hurting, not only physically, but also emotionally and perhaps spiritually? How do we put these principles into action in OUR lives?

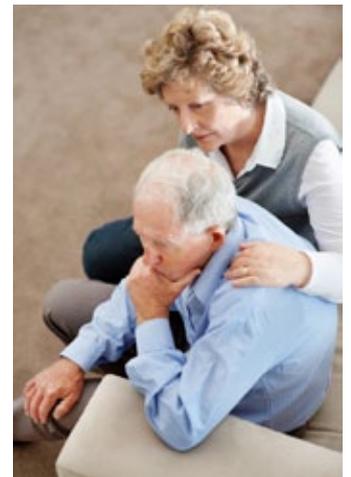
Putting ideals into action

We often take great care to attend to people who are interested in our beliefs. On the other hand, in our own ecclesial community, where we are more familiar with the folk around us, genuine interest and concern are sometimes not so evident. In our eagerness to catch up with family and friends at the meeting, we may forget that some of our members are in real need of our care and attention. For some, the meeting actually emphasizes their feelings of aloneness or separateness. Not experiencing a sense of belonging, they often leave shortly after the meeting has finished, unnoticed, without anyone having spoken to them.

Sometimes, especially in serious situations, such as bereavement or family breakdown, we may find ourselves reluctant to approach the troubled person in spite of our compassion and concern. Feeling able to initiate a personal interaction that is positive and encouraging may be a real challenge for us. However there are skills we can learn to increase our ability and sensitivity in dealing with people in need.

“Tuning in” to people’s needs

We all need to make our own decisions and find our own way through difficult circumstances. We may feel belittled when someone who wants to “help” takes over and starts to control what is happening. Our goal is to help people become better at helping themselves. We do this by listening with interest and actively encouraging the person to talk about the issue. This takes time. Sunday morning may not be appropriate. We may need to arrange a more suitable time and venue.



Sometimes we may wish to do something practical. Ask what would be helpful. Help with shopping or ironing? A drive? Do not feel rebuffed if your offer is refused. Continue to care and encourage others also to be supportive.

Here are some ways to help you really listen to others:

- Make sure you give people enough time to finish what they are saying.
 - Let the speaker **know** that you are listening – make eye contact, don't look elsewhere.
 - Concentrate on **understanding the meaning** of what they are saying – don't think about what you will say
- Try not to change the topic, even if you feel uncomfortable with it.
 - Avoid talking about yourself
 - Avoid giving advice, or diagnosing the problem.
- Try to avoid “why?” questions as they can seem intrusive. “How do you see that?” or “What makes you think that?” are examples of useful questions.

When people are experiencing especially difficult circumstances such as a broken relationship, a drinking or drug problem, an illness, a bereavement or depression, it is often enough to acknowledge their suffering by a hand on their shoulder or a special hug or by simply saying: “I know things are hard for you just now”. If they respond, we listen.

The bereaved may want to talk about the person who has died. Don't shy away from that, thinking it might “upset” them. They may sincerely want to share with you their thoughts or memories. Let them know that you accept their feelings – even negative feelings of anger or guilt, which are normal. Give them time and let them talk. Be interested. For the troubled person, being heard – really heard and really understood - can be such a relief.

Becoming a caring person

A caring person is a good listener, genuinely interested and available – someone who doesn't analyse or moralise, who doesn't tell us what we should do, someone who respects us.

Caring requires respect and empathy

- Empathy means listening with our head and our heart. It requires effort to understand someone and their situation as they see it, and to convey that understanding to them.
- Respect means taking people's needs and concerns seriously, accepting their feelings and their need for privacy. It can be hard to keep confidences, but this is essential.

Taking over is not respectful, nor is giving unsolicited advice. Nor is it appropriate to say “I know just how you feel” since each of us experiences what happens to us uniquely.

Remember that the person in difficulty is in the best position to work out what they should do.

Deep listening with respect and empathy can sometimes help a person find new ways of thinking about their situation. It takes patience and emotional energy.

It is an act of love.



“Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of compassion and the God of all comfort, who comforts us in all our troubles, so that we can comfort those in any trouble with the comfort we ourselves have received from God.” (2 Cor. 1:3-4).