

WALKING IN THEIR SHOES: SEVEN WAYS TO HELP THOSE STRUGGLING WITH DISABILITY

1. In our attempt to comfort, we might be tempted to say: "This experience will draw you closer to God." It might do that, but many families depart from God over such experiences. In other words, our telling a family "this will draw you closer" may be a well-intentioned remark, but it may be entirely wrong. More than likely it is not comforting.
2. In our attempt to comfort, we might be tempted to say: "God gives grace sufficient for every need." While these words are true, they are probably not helpful to a family undergoing a painful period in their family life. Instead of saying, "God's grace is sufficient," let's spend your energy asking: "Precisely how does God pass out that grace?" Perhaps he will use us to dispense grace to that family. Then let's concentrate on doing it wisely.
3. In our attempt to comfort, we might be tempted to say: "This is God's will." That remark is almost never helpful. We may hear families repeat these words as their confession, but words spoken by others and a confession of people experiencing a trial are two very different things.
4. In our attempt to care, we might be tempted to ask the functioning age of a person with intellectual disability. This question may be taken to depreciate the worth of the person, and is better not asked. Let the parents or caregivers volunteer this information if they choose to do so.
5. In an attempt to care, elders and deacons might be tempted to avoid separate visits to adults with intellectual disabilities, mental illnesses, or Alzheimer's, for example. Wherever possible, make separate visits. Probably, even people with severe impairments will know you. If they don't, the parents or family will know we acknowledged their loved one as an image bearer of God!
6. In our attempt to care, let's not forget the caregiver. (Most people with disabilities has one or more people who assist them in the tasks of daily living.) We should ask how he or she is doing, and mean it when we ask. Let's ask in order that we may serve; not out of curiosity. We ought never tell a caregiver: "Call if there's anything we can do." If we walk closely with that person, we'll know what we can do. Then we can ask assertively. For example, "I'd like to arrange for people from church to bring in a meal once a week. Okay?"
7. In our attempt to care, let's be open to reading Scripture differently than usual. For example, at Christmas we read in Luke of the choir of angels announcing Christ's birth. In Matthew 2 we read of a choir of Jewish moms lamenting the sons killed by Herod. Families with disabilities hear that choir too. Let's listen with them.