

Some Thoughts On Caring

Having been asked to write on the subject of "needing care", I wasn't really sure where to begin! Therefore what follows are simply a few thoughts that I have had on the subject of caring for and supporting those who have long-term health problems.

Just to give a few details about where I am coming from: I have been ill with M.E. (Myalgic Encephalomyelitis, a neurological condition) since February 1991; I had been studying to be a nurse at the time, but suddenly became ill following an Hepatitis B vaccination that I was required to have for my training and I have been ill ever since. For the first eight years or so I was moderately affected by my illness, but since 1999 I have had severe M.E. and my health continues to gradually deteriorate. I am mainly housebound and have to spend much of my time resting. How thankful I am for my laptop computer and email and the Internet! I live with my parents, both of whom are past retirement age, and am very dependent on them; this is obviously a matter concern as Mum and Dad get older.

Over the years I have listened to many sermons and read many books and articles on the subject of suffering and related issues, some good, some not so good! I guess a lot depends upon whether or not the speaker or author has had personal experience of suffering or of caring for someone close to them who is unwell or disabled in some way. However, even if they have done so, for those who are ill "suffering is a very lonely path, cut off from others but longing that someone would understand" (Barbara Edwards).

When unable to go out very much and having to spend a lot of the time looking at the same four walls, it is easy to lose touch with reality. Things that are "normal" for most people, such as having jobs, getting married, having children, and so on, can seem abnormal and well out of reach. There are feelings of guilt, of being a burden on those who care for you, knowing how much your illness affects and limits their lives as well as your own. Trying to remain positive and cheerful as much as possible is no doubt a help to those who care - but it is also something of a challenge when feeling ill and in pain! For those of us who are ill and single, another problem is of course that of loneliness, of being cut off from other people, of not having a husband or wife - and it is particularly hard when all those around you appear to be getting married, settling down, and having families!

However, "the times we find ourselves having to wait on others may be the perfect opportunities to train ourselves to wait on God" (Joni Eareckson Tada). It is important to remember that God makes no mistakes. We may not understand why things happen to us, and we may not find it easy to have to 'give in' and swallow our pride and let others do things for us, but for those of us who are Christians, we know that we have a Sovereign God and that our lives are in His hands. As Calvin put it, "we are not afflicted by chance, but through the infallible providence of God".

There are certainly lessons to be learned when ill: "sickness takes us aside and sets us alone with God, and with all the props removed, we learn to lean on God alone" (Horatius Bonar). We come to realise that there is nothing that this world offers that can ultimately give us the comfort and strength that we need to cope from day to day. We also come to see that, from a practical point of view, we need to let others care for and help us, to do things which we would usually do for ourselves - whether that be helping with personal needs, giving a lift to medical appointments, doing some shopping (although much can now be done online!), or whatever.

For Christians who are involved in caring for a fellow Christian who is ill, don't forget that the comfort which a Christian can give to another Christian is unique. Non-Christian relatives and friends can of course offer help and support, and it is much appreciated, but it is only Christians who can bring encouragement and minister to their fellow

believers on a spiritual level. We are told to "rejoice with them that do rejoice, and weep with them that weep" (Romans 12 v 15).

There is, of course, a sense in which real comfort in the midst of suffering can only come to us from God Himself. We have great consolation in Christ. He knows our sorrows, He understands what we are going through. We have the Holy Spirit as our Comforter, to sustain and strengthen us when we feel we are floundering. We have the Scriptures. We know that "all things work together for good to them that love God" and that "the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory which shall be revealed in us" (Romans 8 v 28, 18). Times of suffering and affliction provide opportunities for us to witness and to glorify God. Quoting Horatius Bonar again: "What a God-honouring thing to see a struggling, sorrowing child of earth cleave fast to God, calmly trusting Him, happy and at rest in the midst of storm and suffering".

Back to caring! For someone who has always enjoyed good health, the idea of trying to help a person with a chronic health problem or disability that has lasted for many years and that they know nothing about may seem a bit daunting. What should be done? How can we sympathise with someone if we have never experienced their particular problem? Will we cause offence by saying the wrong thing? These are natural concerns, but should not put people off from trying!

The vast majority of the people with long-term health difficulties that I have come across over the years would be absolutely delighted to have someone get in touch with them and show some support and concern. If you don't know what to do or say, ask! If you know that a person has a particular illness or disability do a bit of reading around on the subject, look up support groups on the Internet, look out for leaflets in your local doctors' surgery. The fact that you have shown an interest, learnt a little about the problem and gone to the effort of getting in touch will be greatly appreciated and be a real encouragement to the sufferer.

When ill, receiving a letter, phone call, email, or even a short visit from a fellow Christian means such a lot - and I am sure that it is virtually impossible for those who are healthy to realise how much doing just a little thing like writing a little note can mean, resulting in many simply not bothering. However, I would urge you to bother, to go to the effort of sending a card or email, making a phone call, dropping in for a visit (but do phone first and don't stay for too long!); it means so much and is such a help and encouragement.

However, saying that, do be careful. Don't start something that you can't keep up. It's no good saying that you will call in once a week if you cannot do it in the long-term. Chronic health problems are a "long haul". Far better to visit once a month and be able to stick at it over a number of months or years, than try calling every week only to find that you can't keep it up and so have to stop after just a few weeks.

When visiting someone with long-term health problems it is likely that they will be, to a greater or lesser extent, physically dependent on others to manage from day to day. However it is important that the sufferer does not become spiritually dependent on any particular person i.e. you mustn't become a "spiritual prop"! It is important to be there to help them, but try to direct them to the Bible, to find their ultimate help and strength from God and His Word.

One other thing to bear in mind is that the person you are trying to help may feel rather useless due to their circumstances. They may have had to stop many of the things they used to do at home, at work and in the church. Do suggest to them that they maintain an interest in and pray for other people. Missionaries known to the church could be a particular focus for their prayers. Writing letters or emails to those working abroad (something that I have enjoyed doing for many years) can be encouraging on both

sides, as can helping others with the same health problem. Also remind them not to underestimate what a powerful witness it can be to non-Christians to see someone coping with a long-term illness. J C Ryle commented that it is possible for those who are ill to "honour God as much by patient suffering as they can by active work. It often shows more grace to sit still than it does to go to and fro, and perform great exploits".

Be Practical - try to think of things that you would find helpful if you were house-bound or bed-bound. For example, offering to help with shopping, cooking meals, giving lifts to doctors' and hospital appointments. If the person is well enough just offering to take them out for a short drive is likely to be greatly appreciated. Going out even for a short time can give a tremendous boost.

Be Spiritual - one of the hardest things that I have found, as a Christian, to cope with during the years of ill-health is the lack of Christian fellowship due to not being able to attend church very often. Listening to recordings of the ministry is to be recommended, and a great help, but being cut off from your Christian family is very hard.

Be Encouraging - chronic ill-health is hard, especially in our society when we are used to the idea that if any health problem arises we can simply go to the doctors and get a prescription to make us better!

Being long-term sick means that it is easy to lose touch with what is going on in the "big wide world". Talk about normal things. Tell the person about your family, what's happening at the church, any interesting places you've visited. Don't expect the sick person to initiate the conversation, after all they may not have been anywhere or done very much, meaning that it is not easy start talking. At the same time, give them time to talk about whatever is on their mind.

You don't need to have experienced an illness in order to help and support someone with it. Be honest. Admit that you don't know much. Most people with a long-term problem know a lot about their condition and will be happy to fill you in on the details - probably in far more detail than you actually need or want to know!

Be Forward Looking - it is always good to talk with those who are ill about Heaven! Remember that this World is not our home, we are just a-passing through. Whether or not we will be healed in this life is unknown, but in Heaven we will see our Saviour and we will be free from sin and from suffering. "For the unbeliever, death is the end of all joys; for the believer, death is the end of all griefs" (Matthew Henry). Always "looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Saviour Jesus Christ" (Titus 2 v 13).

For yonder a light shines eternal
Which spreads through the valley of gloom;
Lord Jesus, resplendent and regal,
Drives fear far away from the tomb.
Our God is the end of the journey,
His pleasant and glorious domain;
For there are the children of mercy,
Who praise Him for Calvary's pain.

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Hazel Stapleton, January 2012

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