What Not to Say to Someone in the Hospital

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Kathryn Butler August 25, 2018

“If one more person tells me to drink apple cider vinegar, I’m gonna lose it.”

I chuckled at first, but his hardened expression silenced me. He leaned forward with his tremulous hands against the hospital tray table, his face contorted in frustration.

“I’m serious,” he said. “I think people don’t know what to say, and they’re trying to help. But comments like that make things worse. Apple cider vinegar isn’t going to cure this.” With a sweep of his hand, he gestured to the oxygen tank, the silicone tubing snaking from his nose, and the inhalers piled atop his tray table.

His wheezing worsened. His air passages, inflamed and scarred with disease, seemed to tighten with each breath.

Apple cider vinegar wouldn’t fix this.

Ministering to the Sick

Ministering to the ill allows us to love our neighbors during their moments of deep suffering and, in so doing, to reflect God’s mercy (Mark 12:31; James 5:13–15). Despite all its modern trappings, hospital ministry hearkens back to Jesus’s walks among wayward multitudes, when his touch and prayers healed lifelong afflictions (Matthew 8:2–3, 14–15; 9:20–25; 14:35–36; Luke 4:40; 6:18–19). When practiced with grace, such visits offer beautiful opportunities for Christian discipleship.

> “Too often awkwardness subverts our efforts to help the sick.”

Unfortunately, too often awkwardness subverts our efforts to help the sick. To see someone we love struggling shakes our composure. Medical gadgetry seems foreign, and glimpses of mortality unnerve us. In our unease, and in desperation to fix the situation, we may fill the silence with advice or platitudes that discourage those whom we seek to uplift.

As both a physician and a friend, I’ve failed miserably in this arena, often saying the wrong thing and witnessing the unhappy effect. Open dialogue with those who bore with me has revealed points to remember. When we lift away the bedside curtain, the following suggestions for what *not* to say may help to build up those we seek to love, rather than tear them down.

1. “Do you know what you should do? You should try . . .”

A visit to a friend in the hospital is not the right time to recommend therapies you’ve learned about on Pinterest, or from your cousin, thrice removed. Hospitalization implies complicated illness and involves a constant barrage of monitoring, invasive tests, and a throng of healthcare professionals. Most people feel overwhelmed, exhausted, and scared in this environment, and to suggest a homegrown or over-the-counter remedy as the answer can be demeaning. Leave the apple cider vinegar at home.

2. “Don’t worry. You’re going to be just fine.”

Unless you have in-depth clinical knowledge about your friend’s situation, don’t promise that everything will be fine. The truth is that, despite our fervent prayers, things may not be fine, and insisting otherwise denies people permission to voice their fears. When a friend is dealing with a real threat to life, empty promises of recovery can downplay her concerns, abandoning her to manage her troubling thoughts alone.

Likewise, avoid militaristic euphemisms, like, “Fight the good fight.” Overcoming illness often depends on influences beyond our control, rather than on sheer tenacity. Physiology and rogue cells, not personality traits, determine disease trajectory, and when we misrepresent recovery as a matter of will, we equate worsening disease with personal failure.

3. “I know how you feel.”

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Even if you’ve suffered from a similar medical condition, don’t presume to know exactly how your friend feels. Illness narratives are not universal. The experience with a given disease differs between individuals, with temperament, values, fears, and past experiences all exerting influence. Instead of assuring a friend of your understanding, ask how he feels. Listen and empathize. Let the focus be on your friend, not on you.

4. “Let me know if I can help in any way.”

This seems like a benign, and perhaps even helpful, statement at first glance. But danger lurks in the phrasing. First of all, it rings insincere. Secondly, it demands that an ailing and already overwhelmed friend determine how you can be useful.

Those hospitalized do need help. They need fellowship, and reminders that their disease does not define them. They need people to manage the mundane responsibilities of life that stumble onward while they lie stranded at the hospital — the accumulating bills, the empty pet dishes, the garden wilting in the backyard.

But the burden for delegating help should not fall upon the one suffering in the hospital. Don't ask a friend to contact you if needed. Think of what she might need, take initiative, and volunteer. Better yet, be the kind of friend for whom barriers to asking don't exist.

5. "You look great/terrible!"

Comments on appearance reflect our own preconceived notions, rather than a sick friend's progress. In the best-case scenario, they offer little solace, and in the worst, they denigrate. Whatever the angle, talking about physical appearance may dissuade a friend from telling you how he's actually doing. Looking great and feeling great are separate entities.

Six Ways You Can Help

Those struggling with illness desperately need reminders of God's grace. Listening and hearing, rather than opining and speaking, are more effective tools for witnessing the gospel in the hospital setting. The following lessons have helped guide me beside hospital beds.

1. Pray.

Cover your sick friend with prayer. Pray with him. Pray for him. Assure him that you regularly lift him up to our risen Lord, who makes all things new.

2. Practice the ministry of presence.

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On some days, a friend may need to work out her worries with you. On others, she may simply appreciate a companion to sit beside her as she watches television. In all cases, aim to follow her lead and to support, rather than to fix. Be available, listen to what she says, and offer sympathy. Be with her because you love her for the unique, wonderfully-made image-bearer God fashioned her to be. Treat her as a sister in Christ, rather than as a project.

3. Be mindful of his needs above yours.

Struggling with illness is exhausting. Don’t visit unless your friend has confirmed he wants company. Pay attention to nonverbal cues, and make an exit when he appears weary. Ask him what is helpful and what isn’t. Invite him to tell you when to leave. Above all, listen to his needs. Empathize, then listen some more. Let him direct the tenor of the visit.

4. Infuse God’s word into visits.

When selected carefully, Scripture can buoy those sinking into despair. Psalms and hymns wield restorative power. This is not the time for lengthy exegesis and Bible study, but short passages that highlight God’s grace and our hope in Christ can uplift a friend in a hospital gown.

5. Leave when the doctor arrives.

Unless she explicitly asks you to stay, excuse yourself from the room when your friend’s physician arrives. The daily fodder of medical practice involves sensitive and private questions, and she may feel uncomfortable answering in your presence. Visiting does not grant you privileges of next of kin. Respect her privacy.

6. Reaffirm your friend’s identity in Christ.

Don’t let illness subsume your friend’s identity. Treat her as you always did before she fell ill. Joke with her as you always would. Discuss mutual friends, favorite memories — the ordinary stuff of life. Never speak to her as though illness has changed who she is, but rather, reaffirm that through faith in Christ she is renewed. Remind her that she is blameless before, and treasured by, the Great Physician, who heals the world through his wounds.