

**mourning** noun  
 mourning  
 Deep sorrow about  
 a loss.

Have you ever lost someone important to you? When someone we love dies, we feel a huge sense of loss. They are missing. We grieve what is lost. We mourn. All sorts of feelings, memories, and thoughts emerge over time as we process how life will be living without them. Multiple factors influence how long people mourn, the level of loss felt, the way they mourn, and what they find helps them.

Death is not the only loss that humans mourn. Following are some of the many personal and communal losses people mourn. Which have you experienced? What might you add?

#### INDIVIDUAL LOSSES

- Death of someone
- Death of a pet
- Loss of employment
- Loss of physical or mental ability
- Estrangement of a friend or family member
- Loss of community due to a move
- Dissolvement of a marriage

#### COMMUNAL LOSSES

- Natural disaster
- Mass violence
- Social polarization
- Ecological damage
- Economic or political segregation
- Government corruption or instability
- Social injustice

Whether alone or in community, humans mourn. What is your reaction when someone else suffers? A natural first response may be to avoid the person mourning for fear of not knowing how to help or what to say. Yet more important than saying the right thing or fixing the situation is to be present with the person in pain. Called a *ministry of presence*, the simplicity and power of this fundamental practice rings true. Just being there, reminding the person (with or without words) that they are not alone, has

significance for the body, mind, and spirit of people who are grieving. Knowing that you care enough to be there is the most basic thing you can do, and it doesn't require highly trained skills, such as psychological or theological training. The idea is simple. Show up. Be physically present with the person or people who are grieving. It is often awkward. It requires courage, patience, and withholding judgment. Perhaps most difficult, it requires resisting problem-solving for the person, when they really just need someone to hold their hand and live with them through the moment.

Showing up does require some thought, however. There are plenty of things we can say that are not helpful. Perhaps you've been on the receiving end of a well-intentioned person who says something awkward that doesn't help you at all, such as:

- *God needed another angel.*
- *She's better off now without pain.*
- *We thought you should have left him years ago.*
- *I know what you feel.*
- *Let me tell you how I got over the pain . . .*

We want to find the right words to share to bring comfort and express our care. But sometimes what we need to do is simply show up and shut up. The ministry of presence, of being there for and with one another in times of deep loss, is what is usually needed most, especially at first.

➤ Imagine yourself showing up. What does that look like to you?

Holy One,  
I know that in life and in death,  
we belong to you.  
Make your presence known  
in all times, especially the bad ones.  
Help me be a loving presence to others,  
drawing from the love you have shown to me.  
Amen.

# FINDING THE PRACTICE IN THE BIBLE


In the story of Job we find a biblical example of people showing up and shutting up, providing a ministry of presence to their grieving friend. There are many lessons in the book regarding God and humanity's role in suffering, all centered on a story in the beginning of the book. Job is described as a pretty perfect person: prosperous, faithful, grateful, loves his children, always does the right thing. What follows is a brief summary of what happens in Job 1:6–2:10.

Some heavenly beings are gathered, talking with God, and the accuser (*satan* is the Hebrew translation of “accuser”) tells God that, while Job is good, he hasn't suffered. It's easy to be righteous when everything in life is perfect. God has obviously been protecting Job and making his life easy. Just make him suffer and see how long he remains so perfect. God agrees to allow the accuser to interfere in Job's life in order to see if he'll remain faithful. But God says not to harm Job physically.

In rapid succession (Job 1:13–19), messengers come to tell Job that enemies came and killed Job's farm animals and servants, then more enemies killed Job's camels and their caretakers. Finally, a great wind destroyed one of his son's homes while all his children were inside, and the house fell and killed them all. Job's response was to mourn, but he didn't curse God.

The next time the heavenly beings gather, God gloats to the accuser that after all that the accuser inflicted, Job has kept faith and persists as a righteous person. So the accuser says, yeah, but if you make him physically suffer, he'll curse you to your face. God says, OK, do it, but don't kill him. So Job suffers great sores all over his body. Even his wife tells him to curse God, but Job says no, God is the source of everything, and I won't. At this point, three of his friends who hear of his troubles surface.

“Now when Job's three friends heard of all these troubles that had come upon him, each of them set out from his home—Eliphaz the Temanite, Bildad the Shuhite, and Zophar the Naamathite. They met together to go and console and comfort him. When they saw him from a distance, they did not recognize him, and they raised their voices and wept aloud; they tore their robes and threw dust in the air upon their heads. They sat with him on the ground seven days and seven nights, and no one spoke a word to him, for they saw that his suffering was very great” (Job 2:11–13).



The book of Job was likely written during the exile when ancient Israelites were suffering under the Babylonian empire. A well-known folklore tale about a man named Job, a saintly man, was used to probe the depths of faith in the midst of suffering. It is doubtful the author and original recipients of this story believed God and other heavenly beings sat around toying with people's lives to test their faith. Rather, the story served to reflect on why bad things happen to good people and God's role.

His friends are shocked, dismayed, and profoundly saddened to see their friend like this. Whether it's empathy for Job or their own traumas that bring on their weeping, the friends are deeply moved by the weight of the moment.

It's difficult to be present through experiences like Job's. It takes courage to step into a space filled with so much heartache, but that is exactly what Job's friends do. They show up for their friend who is mourning, and for the first seven days and nights, they don't speak a word to him (2:13). They are in person, providing Job a ministry of presence, showing up in his grief to embody their solidarity with him.

When they saw Job from a distance, and they saw how bad things were, they could have turned around. No one was forcing them to keep going, and nothing in the text says that Job had sent for them or asked them to come. Certainly, there are times later in the epic poetry of Job when his friends are not as helpful. But in this particular moment, they provide Job a ministry of presence. He knows he is not alone.

As the story of Job progresses, readers discover that Job's friends, each in their own way, reach a point where they can't help but to start problem-solving. Eliphaz suggests that, somehow, either Job or his children had it coming to them and that this was a punishment from God (4:7-9). Bildad says something similar, asking, "Does God pervert justice?" (8:3). Zophar also piles on to Job, saying Job is being stubborn by continuing to claim innocence and that God exacts of Job less than his guilt deserves (11:6)! What happened to being present with Job without judgment? What happened to simply embodying God's presence without adding insult to injury? Job doesn't find their input helpful. In this way, Job's story and the actions of his friends provide lessons in both what to do and what not to do when providing a ministry of presence.



➔ When have you shown up and shut up?

➔ What other ways do you show up?



# FINDING THE PRACTICE THEN AND NOW

People of faith have developed various practices of showing up for those who mourn. From the immediate act of seeking out those in pain and caring for them to rituals around death, we find many examples to consider as we deepen our practice of showing up.

## HOSPITAL VISITATION

When people we know are in the hospital or accompanying a loved one in the hospital, it is often a good time to show up as they navigate an unfamiliar setting and are afraid. This time of showing up for those who are waiting and watching can be extraordinarily difficult; we do not like to put ourselves in uncomfortable situations where we might not have the right words to say. But the beauty of a ministry of presence is that we do not have to have the right words. We can say, “I have no words for how much this must hurt, but I want you to know that I am here with you.” There is also the opportunity to be present so the family members can take a nap or slip out for a shower and a meal. Many people who are grieving feel unable to care for themselves while they are holding watch. It often helps when others show up and relieve people for a short time.

Some churches have trained members to keep track of those who are chronically ill and those in acute situations, in order that they might show up and provide a ministry of presence. In addition, pastors and chaplains are trained in responding to persons facing medical emergencies. Part of that training is to simply be present as a church leader, reminding all that the faith community and God care.

➤ Who is mourning and needs your presence?

## WAKES AND FUNERALS

In much of the world, a very brief period exists between the time of death and the burial of the body, as embalming is not a practice. Generally, people gather where the body is held and comfort one another for this time as others arrive. People bring food and provide help as needed, including sitting in silence with the family. In the US, this period of gathering and visiting the family, called a wake, might happen before a funeral, in a church or funeral home where friends, co-workers, and friends of friends come and are present with the family. Some also have a wake after the funeral service.

In the foundational essay, the writer talks about a friend who went to pastor a small church and found that few people showed up for the funerals of other members. There were not enough people at the funeral to sing hymns or read litanies together. The pastor challenged the congregation to see this as an important ministry of presence, to show up for others grieving their loved ones. It became an important ministry of the church where members came to be with people they hardly knew to provide a helpful presence for those who mourn.

## PUBLIC VIGILS

When a community is in mourning following a tragedy, such as a deadly tornado or a mass shooting, people often gather in the public square to comfort one another. At nighttime vigils, candles may be lit and a time of silence observed in honor of victims.

It takes an act of courage to show up for these events, especially when many are experiencing strong feelings. Yet, physical presence is much more important than thoughts and prayers. Words are not necessarily helpful.

## SITTING SHIVA

In the Jewish tradition, *shiva* is a seven-day mourning period following the death of a loved one where family gathers to comfort one another. Just as Job's friends came and sat with him in silence for seven days, sitting *shiva* is a time for supporters to show up and honor survivors. A brief YouTube video "Why Do Jews Sit Shiva?" ([bit.ly/FMSitShiva](https://bit.ly/FMSitShiva), 1:09) explains the practice.

Recently, following a wave of gun violence, community members in Rochester held a public *shiva* for victims. Watch the YouTube video "Rochester Community Invited to 'Sit Shiva' for Victims of Gun Violence" ([bit.ly/FMViolenceShiva](https://bit.ly/FMViolenceShiva), 1:02).

➔ What do you do when you hear that someone you know is mourning?



Flowers left at Gold Spa in Atlanta for victims of spa shooting; March 21, 2021.  
Photo credit: Jerel Cooper / Shutterstock.com



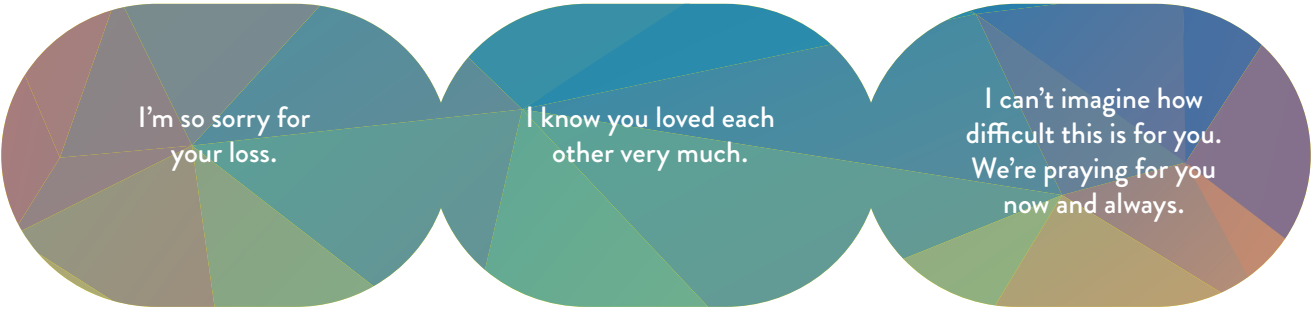
# PRACTICING THE PRACTICE

The hardest part for most of us in showing up for those who mourn is just that—showing up—especially if we are not very close to the person(s). Many obstacles must be overcome, perhaps the biggest being the fact that we are all very busy. Taking time away from our lives may require missing work, switching carpool days, canceling a haircut appointment, rearranging meetings or study groups, and so forth. Showing up also requires courage to be uncomfortable around someone who is in pain and not knowing what may happen. Following are a few ideas to prepare for the unknown.

## PRACTICE WHAT TO SAY

We've mentioned some things *not* to say, such as “God needed another angel.” We've also mentioned that silence is golden, especially when no one is asking for advice, and we can't imagine the feelings and thoughts going through the mourning person's head. A gentle, quiet presence is usually welcomed, though difficult to do when we feel uncomfortable. We tend to want to fill the space with words, and that's where we get into trouble.

But a few phrases are helpful to have to greet the mourner(s) and let them know you are there for them. Following are a few phrases that might be helpful, depending on the situation. Write out some you might want to say as well.



I'm so sorry for  
your loss.

I know you loved each  
other very much.

I can't imagine how  
difficult this is for you.  
We're praying for you  
now and always.

## LEARN ABOUT GRIEF

Psychiatrist Elisabeth Kubler-Ross wrote a groundbreaking book in 1969, *On Death and Dying*. Working with patients who were dying and with their caregivers and families, Kubler-Ross identified five stages of grief that people go through as they experience death or witness the death of a loved one. The process is presented as linear, but we all process the loss of someone in different ways, and we take different amounts of time for each stage. It can help someone who is showing up for persons who are mourning to understand that grief is a journey and not something that is over in a day. While Kubler-Ross's theories have been debated, they are nonetheless helpful to us as we approach the unknown situation and consider the emotional state of those who mourn.

# GRIEF

## DENIAL AND ISOLATION

*This isn't happening. It's not true.*

It is common for people who mourn to be overwhelmed for a period of time and deny what is happening. Many feel numb at some point.

## ANGER

*Why her?*

Anger can be targeted at people or objects not directly linked to the loss and may include feelings of bitterness or resentment. Many are angry at God for not saving the person's life.

## BARGAINING

*If only I were better, things would be different.*

When people mourn, they can feel out of control. Bargaining is an attempt to regain control of the situation, even though it is not always rational.

## DEPRESSION

*I don't know how to go forward from here. My whole life is in shambles.*

People who mourn may find it hard to get out of bed, care for their basic needs, or engage with other loved ones. This is usually a quiet stage of grief.

## ACCEPTANCE

*I am thankful for the love I have shared with others. I have many new opportunities going forward.*

Sometimes people experience peace while mourning. Acceptance usually takes time. People who have accepted their loss can still feel anger, depression, or denial.

## PREPARE A BRIEF PRAYER

Depending on your relationship to the person and what you know about their prayer practices, it might be helpful to have a brief prayer ready if they wish to pray. Consider using or adapting this prayer, or write your own.

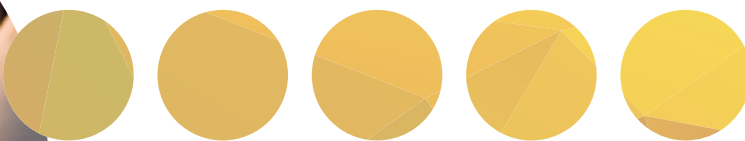
Loving God,  
hold us in your care as we grieve the death of *(Name)*.  
We thank you for your servant who blessed so many people.  
Send your Spirit to comfort all who are mourning,  
and guide us through these next days and weeks,  
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.



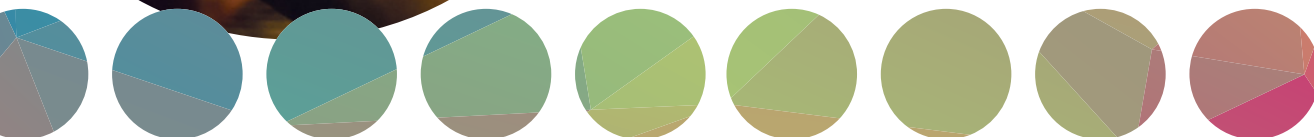


# FOLLOWING JESUS

In the teaching known as the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7), Jesus says, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted” (Matthew 5:4). This isn’t a commandment; it’s a promise. Jesus proclaims God’s mercy and love as it was proclaimed by the prophets, who, by the Spirit of God, brought good tidings to those who were suffering to “bind up the brokenhearted” and to “comfort all who mourn” (Isaiah 61:1–3). In the early portion of the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus lists the experiences that he knows to be the reality for many of the people in the crowd that listen to him. He mentions the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, and those who hunger. He describes a state of being that many of his listeners are living or seeing in the world around them. Jesus goes on to talk about a love ethic that his followers can practice so they can be a community of mutual support. He gives a blessing to those who are merciful, those with hearts free from corruption, those who are making peace, and those who endure challenges for the sake of his gospel of peace.



In each session of this practice, a music video is offered to watch and sing aloud or in your heart. Music is a powerful way people can experience comfort when words don’t come easily. Watch the YouTube video “When We Are Living—Hymn—PFUMC” ([bit.ly /FMWeBelongToGod](https://bit.ly/FMWeBelongToGod), 3:10). The words are provided in the video and also found in *Glory to God*, #822.



Merciful God of peace, you know our sorrows, and whether we are few or many, you know the things that we mourn. May your mercy and peace be visible in our midst, so that those who mourn may feel the comfort that you give through your people. In the name of Jesus Christ, in unity with the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.