

HOW TO ENCOURAGE A FRIEND BY FAITH

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Welcome to Level Up, episode 4, the podcast that discusses our life in Christ.

Today, I'd like to talk about how to encourage a friend by faith.

WHEN A FRIEND IS HAVING A HARD TIME

We've all been there: A friend opens up to us about their feelings or a challenge they face. They want our help. How should we encourage them? There was a time when that sort of situation would have filled me with dread. These days, I follow a few simple steps that work, and I don't feel stressed about helping.

Encouragement is a Christian calling, and an essential component of a healthy church family: "Therefore encourage one another and build one another up, just as you are doing." (1 Thessalonians 5:11, ESV). However, depending on our personality, or experiences, or our friend's circumstances, we may find it difficult to know what to say or do. This essay was written to help you find ways to encourage a friend by faith. There are six steps to follow.

Step One: Begin with prayer.

Prayer is an act of faith by which we invite the Lord into the situation.

The Lord is a great encourager and has the resources we need. He is compassionate, good, wise and loving. The prayer doesn't have to be long or complicated. Try this: "Heavenly Father, we ask you to be present with us. You are our loving Friend. Speak, heal, and lead however you want. Amen."

Letting the Lord in lowers the stress of feeling responsible for our friend's wellbeing.

Step Two: Listen carefully.

If we jump to conclusions and solutions before properly hearing what's happening, we won't be able to help our friend.

The Bible teaches the value of listening before giving our ten cents worth: "Fools have no interest in understanding; they only want to air their own opinions" (Proverbs 18:2, NLT). There are four reasons to listen carefully to a hurting friend:

- Listening shows care and respect,
- People need to feel heard before they will trust what we say,
- Listening brings healing; there's just something about knowing someone else knows what we're going through, and
- We can't offer the best help until we know (beyond the surface level) what's going on.

So, when your friend expresses some hurt or problem, say, "Tell me more about that. What's going on?"

Listening is one of the greatest gifts we can give a friend.

Step Three: Show empathy.

So often, our insights, advice, or guidance sound like judgment or condemnation - even when that's not what we intend.

The way around sounding 'judgy' is to show empathy. Empathy combines understanding with compassion. The Bible aptly describes empathy in Romans 12:15: "Rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep." Empathy enters into our friend's story, not as a critical parent, boss, or judge, but as a fellow struggler.

One way to show empathy is to listen carefully and then say, "I hear you. You feel XYZ because you're going through ABC. It sounds like a real pain/struggle/stress for you. Am I hearing you correctly?" Then, listen to their answer.

We're not there to shame our friends but to share their burden and help them move forward.

Step Four: Point to the hope you've found.

Hope - the light in the darkness of our struggles - is the most powerful encouragement we can give.

The biblical Gospel or Good News describes the source of hope. Several Bible passages summarize the message in memorable ways:

- 2 Corinthians 5:19 (ESV) ... in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them ...
- 1 Timothy 1:15 (ESV) The saying is trustworthy and deserving of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am the foremost.
- 1 John 4:10 (ESV) In this is love, not that we have loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the propitiation for our sins.
- Romans 5:8 (ESV) ... but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, Christ died for us.

In other words, we can confidently tell our friends that God is a loving, self-sacrificing Father who reached out to us when we were running away from him. God is present to help every believer who reaches out to him. He is committed to us forever, joined to us by a covenant sealed in the precious blood of Jesus Christ. He never breaks his word, and is faithful to every promise.

The Gospel means that there is light even on our darkest days.

Step Five: Quote the Bible.

A hurting friend needs easy to remember reasons to believe the Lord is ready to help. In addition to the Gospel itself, it might help to share Bible verses promising the Lord's care and support in our struggles. The following verses have proven helpful in my life (and there are so many more):

- Psalms 34:18 (ESV) The LORD is near to the brokenhearted and saves the crushed in spirit.
- 1 Peter 5:7 (ESV) ... casting all your anxieties on him, because he cares for you.

- Psalms 23:4 (ESV) Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for you are with me; your rod and your staff, they comfort me.

Complete Bible passages can sometimes have more impact than single verses. For example, Ephesians 1:3-8 is packed with encouraging insights into God's love and grace to us in Christ. I've used it many times to encourage myself.

Step Six: Give wise counsel.

We should never rush to give advice to our friends. It's better to wait to be asked, and even then we should ask for permission to speak into their lives.

When we speak, we should only offer wise counsel, that is, advice that reflects God's mind on the matter rather. Often, God's take on a situation is counterintuitive; for example, Jesus taught us to love our enemies, and forgive 77 times, and not worry about food, clothes, or tomorrow.

The Bible contains a wide variety of useful, practical, wisdom. It's getting simpler to find biblical information using the Internet and artificial intelligence to search quickly and accurately. But note carefully, discernment is required to check for accuracy.

When it's time to share, do so with humility. Don't criticize or argue. Do not come across as self-righteous or already perfected. Share the truth in love and have faith that the Spirit of God will use it for good in your friend's life.

Going Forward

We don't have to avoid our friends when they're having struggles. If we follow these six steps, we'll encourage our friends by faith. That way we'll show our love and support in practical ways. Your careful counsel will not only help your friend through their hard times, it will also reflect God's love and care to them.