

Sometimes it's hard to be a friend

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By Martha McIver

WHITE OAK, Texas—When times are good, and our lives are going well, being a friend is easy. Spending time together is fun, and laughter is spontaneous and abundant.

But, when trials come our way and life is difficult, we learn who our true friends are. Many will stay away and not call, not because they don't care but simply because they just don't know what to say.

And what about when the situation is turned and the trials befall your friend? What do you say? What do you do?

I met Cynthia in 1978 or '79. We became acquainted through mutual friends, and over the years our friendship has grown.

Females have a special bond because we can share things with each other that we can't share with anyone else. Girlfriends listen and sympathize without telling us how to "fix" the problem. Girlfriends vent, encourage and brainstorm. Cynthia and I have shared our lives through good relationships and bad ones, job problems, surgeries. You name it, we've shared it! But we are at a place that I have no idea what to say or what to do. Let me explain.

Trouble on the job

Cynthia worked her whole life for a large retail department store where she was expected to move heavy racks of clothes and be on her feet all day—in heels. The grueling mandates of her job took a heavy toll on her health.

Over the years the required operations included back surgery and several foot surgeries. A few years ago a severe nerve problem in her right arm was destroying the muscle between the shoulder and the elbow. A special plate had to be put in her neck to bypass those nerves so she wouldn't lose the use of her hand.

This surgery—on top of all the others she had to have, all caused by the requirements of her job—caused the top dog at the company to do everything possible to get rid of her. Eventually she succumbed to the passive-aggressive pressure and retired.

Caring for Mother

Almost immediately both her mother and her husband began having health issues.

Her husband, Wayne, developed several problems—prostate cancer among them—and the doctors gave him until September 2007 to live.

Cynthia's elderly mother, who had been successfully beating cancer for more than 20 years, had a recurrence, and Cynthia spent most days taking her mom to and from doctor appointments.

Both her mother and her husband were fighters. Her mom would be hospitalized, the doctors would say she had only days to live, and time and time again she got better and would go home.

Although Wayne was in a great deal of pain, he defied his poor prognosis, and September 2007 passed and got further and further into the past. Meanwhile her mother continued to rotate in and out of the hospital.

Around the beginning of 2008 Cynthia's left arm became increasingly painful, and her doctor found that the same thing that happened in her right arm was happening in the left, and he recommended surgery right away before the problem and the pain worsened. Cynthia put off the surgery because she couldn't see how she could properly take care of her mother while recovering from surgery.

Then, near the end of May 2008, Cynthia's house burned. It was a devastating blow. The fire was caused by a faulty breaker, and before the fire department could get there, the fire destroyed the kitchen, living room, utility room and garage.

Only three weeks later Cynthia's mother died.

Beside her husband

Cynthia, who suffers from depression anyway, retreated into a deep shock. For the first few months she even had friends take over the daily overseeing of the rebuilding of the house. All I could do was just be there for her and, of course, pray—a lot.

Eventually she began to take an interest in her house. I even managed to convince her that, as far as fires go, hers was a "good" fire. No one was hurt, and she didn't lose any of her pets. In reality, the only things of real value that were lost were several photos that were smoke and water damaged. After about 10 months her house was ready, and she and Wayne moved back in.

Almost immediately Wayne's health declined even further. For months it was all he could do to just go to work, and he was in incredible pain. Wayne told me that his time was up and to take care of Cynthia.

Instead of unpacking boxes, he just wanted Cynthia to sit with him. He was unable to eat because of the nausea, and then he was hospitalized with double pneumonia. His skin turned from yellow to orange, and the doctors called in hospice. They gave him only days to live. He was not responding to the medications at all. I went with Cynthia to meet with the hospice nurse. Even then, Cynthia did not give up hope that he would get better and come home.

We walked back to Wayne's room, Cynthia took his hand, he took two breaths and that was his last. He had hung on, not just until the house was rebuilt. But also on that Sunday afternoon, when he took his last breath, he waited until his beloved Cynthia was right there beside him, clasping his hand, her cheek pressed to his brow.

Grieving with her

How much more could one person handle? What words could I say to comfort her? How do I answer her when she asks why? What do I say when she tells me she is tired of trying to be strong?

I know that Wayne suffered tremendously for several years, and I know he is no longer in pain. But to say that to Cynthia is not comforting.

I know God doesn't give us more to handle than we are able (with His help), but Cynthia is in deep shock, and she is weary of even day-to-day life.

Speaking of shock, isn't God wonderful? He thought of everything! He created shock to help us through deeply traumatic losses and events.

As Cynthia's shock lessens, how do I help her? I told her I would be there for her. I told her that if she needed me to cry with her I would, or if she needed me to laugh with her I would, or if she needed me to be strong for her I would.

Did what I say help? Maybe. Did I make her feel better? I doubt it, but I did try. I want to be more than a fair-weather friend, and I will keep on trying—for as long as it takes.

I will continue to grieve with her over the loss of her husband and mother. I will continue to help her decorate her rebuilt home or write thank-you notes. I will be there to lend an ear or a shoulder, to give a hug or just to sit with her in comfortable silence as only longtime friends can do.

I know God has something wonderful in store for Cynthia. These trials will prepare her to help someone else facing similar heartbreak. These trials have also been to prepare her for fabulous blessings from God. I have not told Cynthia this. She will know it when it happens.

Even though I don't know the right words to say, I am there for her, and I can only pray that is enough. Being a friend is often hard work, but I have learned that it is certainly worth all the effort.