



Practical Ways to Help a Friend During a Crisis

Practical Ways to Help a Friend During a Crisis

by Jenni Burks

Sometimes it's hard to know how to help a friend who is hit with a crisis. What can we do for a friend whose child or spouse is in the hospital, or faces a grim diagnosis that means lots of appointments and hospital visits lie ahead?

Whether it's an accident, illness, mental health emergency, or something else entirely, when people are struggling it really does make a world of difference to show up and support them in some way.

We tend to hear the news, swell up with emotion and a desire to help, yet struggle to know what to actually do.

About a year and a half ago our household was plunged into such a crisis. One of our teenaged children tried to take his own life, and that first visit to the emergency room and acute hospitalization were the beginning of five months of unpredictable crisis-mode, followed by 11 months of a more "stable" but still extremely painful and challenging trial.

I am so, **so** thankful for the people who were there for us through that time.

They weren't always sure what to say or what to do, **but they said and did things**. And sometimes their help literally made it possible for me to get through another day.

I love how Dave Furman describes bearing one another's burdens. To paraphrase, imagine someone is struggling under a heavy load they can't possibly carry alone. They're buckling under the weight. It's going to crush them. You can't take it from them, and you wouldn't be strong enough to bear it alone anyway. But what you *can* do is duck under the burden yourself, right beside them, and do what you can to bear some of its weight, at least for a while.

You'll both be tired and sweaty. You will probably be wet with some of your friend's blood, sweat, and tears.

But because of your help, your friend won't be crushed.

Bearing another's burden like this involves doing things that we wouldn't ordinarily do for people under normal circumstances. It involves making sacrifices we wouldn't make under normal circumstances.



In no particular order, here are some of the things folks did for us that made a difference, as well as some of the things that we now know from experience would have made a difference.

Ways to Help a Friend in Crisis

Show up at the hospital – without expectations and with flexibility.

Even if you show up and your friend sends you away, showing up makes an impression. While it's unhelpful to have a bunch of extra people there, it's also terribly lonely and challenging for a parent to be there alone.

If you have a network of friends, coordinate to make sure **one** of you stops by (or maybe a few of you take turns). ***Especially*** in the emergency room, when the visit is unexpected and your friend is likely unprepared.

I was so thankful for the times someone showed up in the ER to see if there was anything they could do. And I was thankful when they were willing to do whatever was best at the time, whether or not that meant staying with me.

Depending on the situation, your friend may benefit from you staying with the hospitalized child to allow your friend to go get things from home, or shower, sleep, or go to the cafeteria for a quick bite to eat. You may be able to run errands for your friend, such as picking up essentials from their home, or bringing them food. You may be able to pick up other children your friend was forced to bring into the ER and take them back home. Your friend or their child might benefit from just having someone to talk to – or to sit beside them quietly, or to pray with them.

The best way to know what your friend needs in that moment is to be there and see the need.

Offer to ride along.

This is more specific to mental health emergencies. Where we live, our local hospital does not have a pediatric psychiatric unit. So when a minor comes through the emergency department with a mental health crisis and is assessed to need an acute hospitalization, the hospital social worker does a “bed search.” This means they contact pediatric psych units looking for a place to send the patient.

The closest hospital for a pediatric acute stay is about an hour away. When an available bed is found, transfer paperwork is completed, and, according to our hospital's policies, the patient is sent to the other hospital by ambulance while the parent follows behind in their own vehicle so they can do intake paperwork on arrival.

This process takes h-o-u-r-s. Sometimes days. And, for some reason, the transfer almost always seems to end up taking place very late at night or early in the morning. My husband and I have made one and two hour drives in the middle of the night to do this multiple times now. In an unfamiliar city. After 8 or 12 or more hours in the emergency room. While trying to juggle other children and logistics (such as work obligations – my husband can't take time off work).

It was **so** encouraging and helpful when friends offered or agreed to ride along on these journeys! Having someone along provides another driver, additional safety, someone to talk to and help keep the driver awake, and just basic moral support and encouragement. Especially for people who don't have children or who have flexible work schedules, this is a significant way you can help someone in this situation.

Bring a meal

A meal delivery plan with friends may be helpful at some point, but for a short-term emergency it's often most helpful to have a meal provided to those at home right that night – and maybe to those in the hospital, too.

Let them talk if they need to.

Many people talk a lot when they're under a lot of stress or in a crisis. (If they're past the point of silent shock.) Be a safe person they can rattle on to, whether venting about the situation or just anxiously talking about nothing. Try not to let your non-verbals indicate you're bored, annoyed, or impatient. Listen with compassion and kindness. Don't try to solve anything unless they ask. Just be there and let them talk.

Understand that not all the information may be accurate if they're processing and seeking to understand test results or other developments. Let them process. Sometimes you can help them process well and discern things accurately by asking clarifying questions or repeating what you heard a doctor say, but sometimes it's most helpful to just listen while they talk it out.

Understand that not all they say is supposed to be public knowledge, and respect them later by not sharing their story without permission. It's their story to share.

Resist the urge to be annoyed by long emails or texts, and respond with compassion.

In these situations, most folks don't have much time to sit down and think of how to word an update in a way that's acceptable to everyone who may receive it. Often, updates and cries for help or prayer are shot as quickly off the fingers as the words would have been spoken. It takes a lot of time, and a lot of emotional and mental energy, to edit these down. Time and energy they probably don't have.

For the love of everything good and beautiful, just read it and take it in the best way possible. Don't comment on the length or lack of tactfulness in your reply. You're the one with stability. Respond to them with calmness, compassion, and a little reassurance or encouragement.

Don't expect immediate replies. Also, follow-up.

If you reach out, do so with full acceptance of the fact you might not get a reply. I can't tell you what a relief it is when friends who reach out have this mindset. It's even ok to tell them in an initial email that you understand they're overloaded and you won't be offended if they aren't able to reply.

During a crisis, everything gets behind. It just adds to the stress and unnecessary guilt to have a bunch of emails sitting there waiting on a responses.

That said, don't just send one email or text and assume all is well if you don't hear back. Give it a few days, then follow up again. Send an encouraging word that doesn't necessitate a reply, or offer to help, again. Lack of response is often a sign that help is needed, if only they could think of what help they need and how to communicate it.

If you can't help, just say no from the beginning.

I have so much respect for people who say no up front. We had acquaintances who agreed to be on my list of people I could call if another emergency hit. If we had to head back to the hospital or an emergency appointment and I needed help. A few of them, the very few times I reached out to them, would either never reply or sound annoyed I actually called them and asked that they inconvenience themselves.

Emergencies are inconvenient. Don't say yes to being an emergency contact if receiving such calls actually bugs you, or if you know you'll never be able to actually help. It's better to be honest from the beginning and send a nice note here or there than to try to appear like a support when you're not actually willing or able to be one.

Offer specific help.

Don't just say "If there's anything I can do to help, let me know!"

Don't just ask "What can I do to help?"

Don't put the burden of figuring out what to ask for on the person who is suffering. In the blur, they may not even know what to ask. And when they look at the pile-up of life around them, they may not know where to start, or they may resist reaching out to ask.

Take that burden on yourself and offer specific help.

Things you can offer to help with include daily tasks like laundry, dishes and sweeping the floors. You could offer to mow the lawn in the summer, or to clear snow in the winter. Offer to watch their children or chauffeur them to appointments or practices. Offer to stop at the pharmacy, run errands, walk their dog, get groceries, bring meals...be specific when you offer. You might give them an idea they wouldn't have thought of on their own.

Do something without asking

Even better than offering (they might say no), just show up for a visit and do something.

One woman from my church came over for a visit. I apologized for the massive pile of clean laundry in the corner. As we chatted, she started folding. So I began folding, too. By the time she left, it was all folded and put away, and we'd had a wonderful, edifying visit.

Pay attention to what you see and hear and you'll find ways to help. I've known people to show up and mow a lawn (they don't even have to be home for you to do this!), and I've known others to do a bunch of cleaning while watching the

kids. If you notice a bare pantry or empty fridge, show up with some essential groceries.

During one of the worst parts of our trial, a friend of mine could tell I was completely spent, mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually. So she showed up to hold down the fort and give me respite...but I was like a deer in the headlights. I had so many urgent, behind tasks pulling at me. I didn't know how to use the time. I was frozen and overwhelmed. My friend told me to go get my Bible and my ipod and go somewhere and spend time finding refreshment in the Lord. I nodded, obeyed, and drove away. She knows me well, and she knew this is exactly what I needed. I ended up going for a nice walk at a park while listening to a sermon, and enjoying some peaceful Bible reading and prayer outside. It was exactly what I needed.

Help with logistics.

I mentioned this under offering specific help, but it deserves its own spot. When you think of how to be an encouragement, think of logistics. Think of how you can practically take some of the burden off your friend and bear it yourself.

Watch their other children while your friend is at the hospital or appointments — or so your friend can sleep. Give rides to lessons, games, practices, events, and appointments. Take care of daily chores and duties that would otherwise pile up. Make freezer meals. Organize a meal delivery plan with other friends.

Cards and texts are nice (and sometimes all you can do!), but they don't help anyone get caught up. Life's demands don't take a break for emergencies. Help practically whenever and however you're able.

Help minister to children still at home.

Even if you're not babysitting, you might be able to minister to children still at home while their sibling or parent is hospitalized. Emergencies are hard on kids, too. And in the middle of the chaos, mom and dad aren't always able to keep everything routine and stable for them.

Don't forget the children involved — and their emotions and how they're processing the situation — as you seek to encourage and help the adults.

Find ways to help long-distance and long-term

Our local hospital is one people frequently come to from out of town for specialized and long-term care. At one point our son was in a facility 3 hours away from us.

If your friend has to take their family member for care out of town, they face unique extra challenges. There may be things you can do to help make the commute and time out of town more manageable.

If you have hotel points you can share, that can help cut your friend's hotel expenses. Gas cards and restaurant gift cards can be a huge blessing. If they have to travel with children, you might give them activities for the children to use in the car or in waiting rooms, or even buy passes to a local attraction where they will be traveling to occupy the other children for a day.

Write an encouraging note or card

Don't just think about your friend. Text them. Call them. Mail them a card. Drop a card off at their house. Communicate your love and encouragement to them.

Give money

If you can, stick some money in your card. Or just randomly Paypal them a gift. Unless your friend is wealthy enough to not worry much about a budget, the added expenses of a crisis situation can be crippling.

I'm not even talking about medical bills. Just extra gas and deviation from the grocery budget can put a household in the hole (or on the side of the road) very quickly. A five dollar bill can mean your friend can eat breakfast in the hospital cafeteria. Gas and grocery gift cards are also great, and so are gift cards for local restaurants, if you're more comfortable with gift cards than with cash.

Pray for them – and with them

If you say you'll pray for them, do it. And if you have them on the phone or are with them in person, ask if you can pray for them aloud right then and there. It's such an encouragement!

Stick with them.

Some crises last a long time. Don't show up at first and then disappear.

One friend of mine hasn't been able to offer much practical help due to her own circumstances, but for the last year and a half she has texted me faithfully at least twice a month. She always asks how she can pray, and offers words of encouragement that remind me of God's faithfulness. She's still with me. I know I can text or call her anytime. It means a lot!

Keep asking what you can do, even after they seem like they're fine. There's a time of catching up and recovery after a crisis. Your friend would be really blessed by help with that, too.

Don't do nothing.

Silence – especially prolonged silence – feels like abandonment. And in a crisis, days feel like weeks. *Say something. Do something.*

It's better for you to try to do something and end up saying something a little cringy or maybe coming off as a little annoying, than to say and do nothing because of uncertainty.

Further reading

One book I recommend on this topic is *Being There: How to Love Those Who Are Hurting* by Dave Furman.

Can you think of other ideas? How have people helped you when you were in crisis? How do you wish people would have reached out?