

"I Wouldn't Know What to Say"

Selected Exercises Taken From A Study Guide for the book *Sit Down, God ... I'm Angry* Study Guide by Keith Dodd

Included are a few group exercises I included in a study guide for a thirteen-session class based on the above book by Pastor R. F. Smith, Jr. In *Sit Down, God ... I'm Angry*, the author tells his personal story of grief. He shares how permitting himself to get angry with God not only helped him cope with tragedy, but brought him to a deeper understanding of God ... and of himself. The whole series was designed to help participants examine the role of anger, ways to deal with anger, and strategies for helping others cope with tragedy and grief.

Some of the exercises dealing with how we can support people in grief are included here. ("What not to say" is stressed as much as "What to Say".) They are best used in small groups as they can stimulate sharing and discussion. Use any as you see fit. Feel free to copy, cut/paste, etc.

In all the exercises, there are NO right or wrong responses. Supporting others does not take the form of a script or formula. Responses are best considered in a context of what words of support are helpful and what words might be of little help or even hurt.

(Many of these exercises caution us regarding "preaching" to the grieving ... presenting theology, giving spiritual explanations, and such. These are not meant to suggest we avoid talking theology with others or sharing our explanations for difficult-to-understand events. Doing such is a vibrant component of faith. The point here is such talk during a time of grief is probably unnecessary, easily misunderstood, and often leads down a path we regret we started. It's simply not the time or place.)

I. Exercise: What Not to Say

To be truly helpful, we must recognize the condition of the one who is grieving. It probably isn't the time for theology or explaining. It is usually the time for *listening*.

In the following, on newsprint or the board, list the plain print cautions. Allow others to think of examples that violate the caution. The sections in italics are possibilities that you might give to stimulate discussion.

a. Don't say things critical of the mourner. (*Examples: "Don't take it so hard." "Try to hold back your tears, you're upsetting people."*)

b. Don't try to minimize the pain. (*Examples: "It's probably for the best." "She's better off now."*)

c. Don't ask the mourner to disguise or reject feelings. Their feelings are real. (*Examples: "We have no right to question God." "Think of it in the positive: God must love you to have selected you for this burden."*)

Ask people to share "poor" responses they have heard. Ask how each violates the cautions.

II. Exercise: What Do I Say?

When we visit and try to comfort others, we know what we mean by our words. However, we must recognize that the one in grief is in a different place and frame of mind. Often they do not hear the words we say (or as we mean them); they hear something different.

Below are a number of situations with responses someone might give. Have an individual read one, with the group then responding to the following comments/questions. (If the group is large, this might be best done in smaller groups.) You may not want to use all the situations.

Use these four comments/questions to analyze and perhaps improve the responses:

- a. Identify what the comforter did and/or said that was helpful to the person they were trying to comfort.
- b. Identify what the comforter did and/or said that may have been hurtful to the mourner.
- c. If part of the response was "hurtful", try to interpret that through the ears of the mourner – what do you think the mourner actually hears?
- d. Restate the scenario as spoken by someone who cares AND understand the state and needs of the mourner.

----- SITUATIONS -----

1. Tasha and Jose have just returned from the funeral of their infant daughter. At the reception, their next-door neighbor, Perry, offers his condolences: *"I know this is a difficult time. It's hard to understand. But God must have reasons for taking your daughter. You must believe God has a purpose in this."**

2. Martha, a widow, had just used her insurance payment to buy sufficient antiques to open a shop. The day before the store was to open, lightning hit the story, causing a fire that destroyed the whole inventory. Because the goods were priceless and irreplaceable, they were insured at only a fraction of their value. "Why did this happen to me?" she cried. One friend, to console her, said, *"I know this seems devastating, but maybe God doesn't want you to endure the stress of running a tough business. Maybe this was God's way of getting the message across."*

3. Ralph had always been a successful athlete, proud of his accomplishments to the extent of being boastful. Diving into the shallow end of a swimming pool, he severed his spinal cord and is paralyzed for life. A colleague tried to console him: *"It's hard to understand, but maybe this is God's way of purging you of pride and arrogance. Maybe it's God's way of making you a better, more sensitive person."* *

4. Pat and George's second child was born with serious mental limitations. Their good friend, Alice, tried to help them make sense of it. *"I know this is difficult and doesn't seem to make sense. But God must have a plan. God will use your child to deepen and enlarge our souls; she will teach us love and compassion."*
5. A Trans-Atlantic airplane experienced engine failure shortly after take-off and crashed, killing all 200 passengers aboard. Passenger 201 had a flat tire on the way to the airport and didn't make the flight. TV networks interviewed grieving relatives of those killed in the crash. They also interviewed Passenger 201, who was still at the airport. "This is terrible for everyone. But God didn't want me to die," he said. "God must not have been ready for me, yet!"
6. Harriet's young son died during an operation to correct a congenital hearing malfunction. Her pastor sat with her in the hospital and held Harriet's hand, then said, *"I know this is a painful time for you. But I know that you will get through it all right, because God never sends us more of a burden than we can bear. God only let this happen to you because God knows you are strong enough to handle it."*
7. Clarence's five-year-old son Michael ran into the street chasing a ball, was hit by a car and killed. In the funeral service's eulogy, the pastor said, *"This is not a time for sadness or tears. This is a time for rejoicing, because Michael has been taken out of this world of sin and pain with his innocent soul unstained by sin. He is in a happier land now where there is no pain and no grief; let us thank God for that."**
8. Karen was a four-year-old when her mother died after a long illness. After the funeral, Karen's well-meaning aunt, hugged Karen and said, *"Don't feel bad, Karen. It's hard to understand, but God took your mother because God needed her now more than you did."*
9. Carlos just heard that, due to corporate downsizing, he was going to be laid off from his long-sought computer-programming job. His friend Priscilla tries to comfort him: *"Don't let it get you down. You finally got that job and proved yourself; now with that success, you are sure that corporations need people like you. Get back to knocking on doors. You'll have another job before you know it!"*

* Taken from Harold S. Kushner's *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1982.)

Discuss each using the guides listed before the scenarios.

A thought: In many of the scenarios, the words may have been helpful, if the speaker had simply stopped after saying something like, "It must be difficult." We need to think about how the mourner interprets our words. To someone grieving a loss, words such as "God needed her in heaven," may well be interpreted as "You didn't need her here enough!"

Suggestion: During the next few days, make a mental list of comments you hear well-meaning people make as they try to comfort others. These can be from actual conversations or from

television programs or books. Based on the state of mind and needs of the mourner, decide whether you think each statement or action was helpful or harmful. Share with others at the next session.

Another thought: *"Tragedy is not the time to discuss theology, to confront, or correct; it is a time for comfort."*

III. Exercise: How Can I Help?

(The scenarios here were used in a section that related to supporting people by being aware of the "Stages of Dying/Grieving". The stages are: a.) Shock and Denial, b.) Anger and Rage, c.) Bargaining, d.) Depression, and e.) Acceptance. However, they can be useful in simply thinking about how we can support and not hurt.

Below is another list of scenarios that call for a possible response and/or action. You may want to use that to stimulate discussion of possible responses.

You may also use the list to analyze a sample response that is given after each one. Realizing that there are no right or wrong answers, and that our goal is to support and comfort others, use the following scale to rate how well the responder does.

1 Point: No matter what the quality of the response, give one point if the comforter tries to help even by simply being present. Give no additional points if the response may well be considered hurtful by the one being consoled.

2 Points: The comforter tries to help by being present and the response is probably NOT hurtful to the one being consoled.

3 Points: The comforter tries to help by being present and the response may possibly be helpful to the one being consoled.

1. Scenario: You meet Bill at work. His jaw is clenched, fire is in his eyes. "I didn't get the promotion!" he says, pounding the table. "I knew that would happen. That new guy got it. The deck is stacked against those of us who have been around here for years!" He looks at you (another long-time employee). You want to help.

What do you say/do?

A response to rate:

____ 1. *"Bill, you know the deck isn't stacked. That new guy is talented. You'll get over it. Try again next time. Want to play golf after work?"*

2. Scenario: Mary calls. You know today was the day doctors would report on Mary's tumor. "It wasn't good," Mary says. "Cancer. All the time you spent with me in prayer ... down the drain." She is quiet, obviously waiting for your reply.

What do you say/do?

A response to rate:

____ 2. *"I'm sorry. I was hoping for good news, too. I can't know how you must feel now, but I'm shaken. I'd like to pray with you ... don't know if it helps, but I need to pray. I'll be right over."*

3. Scenario: "I did it again," Bob says. "Stopped for a drink after work. One, two, ... then it was a dozen. I'm a loser. And YOU'RE no help! You licked your problem. But you have help –

all your family. I have no one." He won't look you in the eye. You'd like to leave, but you want to help.

What do you say/do?

A response to rate:

____3. *"I'm sorry, Bob."*

4. Scenario: "It's not fair! Patty works as hard as she can and can't answer any questions. It's not fair that she's learning impaired. Look at Jennifer. She doesn't even care and she gets straight A's. Her folks don't even go to church. So much for trying to live right. It's not fair, is it?"

Although the question is a rhetorical one, you know you have to say something.

What do you say/do?

A response to rate:

____4. *"I know it's tough having a daughter who needs so much help. But you don't know how hard Jennifer works at home, do you? Maybe she's putting in long hours, too. Just think how good Patty has been for some of the members of our church. She's made many people more understanding of learning differences."*

5. Scenario: "If I give that \$80,000 my aunt left me to the church, maybe God will grant me enough time to see Jeff graduate. I know I don't have much time, but maybe God will give me that much. Will you go with me to see Pastor Reynolds?"

What do you say/do?

A response to rate:

____5. *"Don't be silly. God doesn't work that way. You're just grasping at straws. Don't worry; you'll probably make it until Jeff's graduation. Set that as your goal."*

6. Scenario: "They say Mother's case is terminal, only a few months. But they're WRONG! She's strong. She won't let this take her. I'm going to take her to another doctor. Her doctor is a quack. She just needs a better doctor to prescribe the right medicine. Can you help me get Mother in to see your doctor?"

What do you say/do?

A response to rate:

____6. *"Of course, I'll see if my doctor can see your mother. Do you think she will want to go?"*

7. Scenario: "Why do you insist on calling me? Each day it's, 'How are you doing, today?' you ask, always so cheerful. You know how I'm doing – rotting away! You wouldn't know. You

can't know how I feel. You can go out any night you want and have fun. And you call yourself a friend! I should quit answering your telephone calls. Would that make you leave me alone?!"

What do you say/do?

A response to rate:

____7. *"No, if you don't answer, then I'll just come over. You're my friend and I care about you – even if you make it difficult some times. I can't feel what you are feeling, but I want to be around you."*

8. Scenario: "You're so good to me, and I don't deserve you. I know it must be a chore being around me. I'll never get over her death. I'll never be able to look at the bright side. There's *never* going to be a bright side. I'm so depressed, and I'm sure I drag you down, too. Why don't you go on tonight without me? You can have fun. Maybe someday I'll snap out of it – I'll give you a call then. Go on, go without me."

What do you say/do?

A response to rate:

____8. *"Of course you'll get over it. It's only been six months. By this time next year, you'll only be remembering the good times you had with her. Get your coat; I'm going to see that you have a good time!"*

IV. Exercise: Both Patient and Physician

The Christian life can be considered a two-way street when it comes to the area of giving comfort. The author of the book that this study guide supports gives a description of the church in this two-way street such that we receive AND we have a responsibility to serve. He describes the church as a hospital:

"At times during my wilderness wanderings outside the intensive care unit (where his son lay dying); I could back off and observe various dynamics at work. I saw the church living out my favorite definition for it: 'a hospital for souls where we alternately serve as patient and physician.'"

Below is a chart that indicates a place for various ministries of the church, and a place to consider when we've been first a patient then a physician in the area. That is, where you have been on the receiving end of this ministry (as patient), and when you have been on the giving end of the ministry (as physician). A sample is given in the first row. Other areas of ministry might include "support for those in financial need"; "support for the hungry"; "support for those in major life transitions"; "support for those at special stages of life (childbirth, getting old)"; and so forth.

Note: If participants have trouble seeing themselves as "physician," suggest that they consider a church organization or board of which they are a part, or simply some group within the church.

Patient and Physician

Area of Church Ministry/Christian Care	When I have been a Patient	When I have been a Physician
<i>1. Visiting the sick.</i>	<i>Last month after my gall bladder surgery, church sent in meals.</i>	<i>Along with two other members of the prayer circle, I did hospital rounds during April.</i>
2.		
3.		
4.		
5.		

Further Questions:

1. In your church, where do you see truth in the author's definition of a church?
2. Does your church fulfill the definition? Give examples to support your answer.

3. Does my congregation expect "the church" to be physician, or do the individuals readily accept the role of physician?

4. For you, is it more difficult to be patient or physician? Why?