

What Can We Do When a Loved One is Suffering? by littlewoo

What can we do when a loved one is suffering?

This question has come up a lot so I wanted to share some thoughts in case it may be helpful to you or a loved one.

First, I acknowledge how challenging it is to witness any kind of suffering, whether it is physical, emotional or existential pain.

But let me throw in a specific curveball...

What if they are suffering yet there is not much that you can do about it?

This challenging scenario can arise for many reasons.

Sometimes, the solutions are not known or available.

Sometimes, your ability to help is limited.

Sometimes, the person cannot receive your help.

One of the toughest aspects of unconditional love, is this ability to care about someone's well-being and happiness, yet also be able to bear witness to their pain.

Of course, we want to intervene because we don't want them to suffer.

We want to take action, roll our sleeves and get involved.

There will be many times when our physical, financial or emotional support is needed and wanted. These are the times when we feel purposeful, useful or beneficial. It feels like we are making a difference.

But there will be times when we cannot fix the problem, alleviate the pain or even offer our help. These are the times when we feel lost, unhelpful or useless. It feels like we are failing someone.

The Cycle of Helpless Empathy

Here is a closer look at what I describe as "Helpless Empathy".

It begins whenever we see suffering in the world. We may sense or literally feel the pain

that others are experiencing. It can be overwhelming, gut-wrenching and even debilitating.

This is our sense of Empathy.

Naturally, we want so much to help but it may be inappropriate, insufficient or unwelcome. We may not know how to help or are incapable of helping. This inability to alleviate someone's suffering can feel like a terrible burden that we desperately want to lift yet cannot.

This is our sense of Helplessness.

When our Empathy is followed by our Helplessness, it causes Guilt or Anxiety.

We end up in survival mode and activate coping strategies such as Avoidance, Apathy, Amusement or Achievement. These reactions may keep us afloat yet they do not alleviate the suffering that we continue to feel in ourselves or others.

Eventually, we may end up feeling Shame.

As our self-worth takes a beating from the waves of shame, we end up withdrawing from others or self-sabotaging. As the shame compounds, we go deeper into our survival patterns.

Most of us are aware of other people's suffering. Whether they are close to us, acquaintances or strangers, this helpless empathy can crush our hearts.

Over the last 15 years, I have been helping friends and members of the community who are dealing with crises, chronic or terminal illness, disability or multiple barriers.

Despite volunteering many hours a week in this capacity, I cannot meet the demand. Though I offer as much support as I can, I know that I cannot alleviate all the suffering.

So how can we bear all the illnesses, accidents, losses, struggles and barriers that people are experiencing?

What can we do when we witness something "profane" happening to others yet we cannot do anything about it?

And how do we bear our own suffering when there is no known respite?

The key lies in this realization: Our purpose is not to alleviate all the suffering that we encounter. This is a heavy, impossible burden and we will burn out.

Our purpose is to create beauty and meaning through our soul connections and expressions.

In other words, our ability to see and interact with each other on a soul level is our deepest gift.

It is also a gift that nurtures both the giver and the receiver.

The Practice of Holding Space

I know that the phrase “holding space” is very popular in certain circles. It has many layers of meaning but there is a funny memory that comes up for me every time I hear that phrase.

Years ago, a cheeky friend of mine walked around a music festival, asking his friends to hold a poster of outer space for a photo montage called “Holding Space”. He knew that his “hippie” friends would appreciate the joke and it was a big hit.

However, it also reminded me how often this phrase is seen as a trite expression because to many people, it means:

Doing nothing yet claiming to be helping in some airy fairy way...

In actual practice, the art of Holding Space means many things.

On one level, it is about the gift of deep Attention.

It means that you are acting as a Sacred Witness for a loved one’s experiences. You are aiming to be present, awake and mindful of their experience as it unfolds, be it painful or joyful. Though you may be ready and willing to give physical, financial or emotional support, you understand how important it is to be a deep listener, confidante and observer. You are bearing witness to their experiences.

On another level, it is about the gift of deep Reverence.

Your respect for someone’s journey reflects great love, admiration and appreciation for their life, in darkness and in light. Though you may have empathy for their pain, you also acknowledge their great strength and courage. You are bearing witness to their spirit.

On still another level, it is about the gift of unconditional Love.

You are aiming to release your judgments so that they will not be burdened by your fears or expectations. You are wanting to offer deep acceptance of their existence, regardless of what is happening. You are bearing witness to their inherent worth.

The actual practice of holding space allows us to care deeply and bear witness to our loved one’s suffering with courageous presence.

If we don’t develop this capacity we will hide, run, look away or distract ourselves. We will miss the incredible opportunity to offer unconditional love to our friends and family. We will also miss the chance to truly know someone, through the sacred and the profane.

We will never know the depths of their soul if we can only hold them when they are joyful and comfortable.

We will also never know the depths of our own soul if we can only be with others when we are joyful and comfortable.

The Practice of Seeing the Soul

Even though physical acts of love are real and helpful, your ability to appreciate someone’s soul is very powerful.

When you can see into a person's soul, you are recognizing their true essence, which is eternal and untouchable. Unlike the body, it cannot be damaged, broken, tainted or abused. It is timeless and divine.

As you see their soul, you are more able to offer them the freedom to be, to do and to exist.

As you see their soul, you are more able to free them from your need to fix, resolve or rescue them.

For example, many people want their loved one to quit smoking, to start exercising, to eat better, to do this or do that in order to be healthier and happier.

This desire is coming partially from love and partially from fears of losing them or seeing them suffer.

Though we may offer our help or suggestions, we can learn to offer these without attachment and with respect for our loved one's autonomy. In other words, we can trust them to make the choice that is theirs to make.

If their situation impacts our well-being or safety, we have the right to set boundaries, release responsibility for their choices and not take on the consequences of their actions or inaction.

Whenever you are around other people, it is an opportunity to observe or engage with their soul.

It is a chance to recognize their timeless essence, which is true, good and beautiful. It is about realizing their inherent value which exists beyond their appearance, personality, quirks, job, status, actions and behaviors.

When you can see someone's soul, it means that you recognize who they truly are, despite the ups and downs of their physical or emotional self.

This is one of the greatest forms of love we can offer because it is not tied to a condition or expectation. It is not weighed down by judgment or disappointment. It is a gracious love based on soul-level Recognition.

If people feel seen, understood and respected by you even when they are struggling or suffering, it creates a mutual field of Dignity, which empowers and inspires, even in the face of uncertainty and pain.

The Practice of Namaste

Namaste is a Sanskrit word that is known all over the world through the spread of Yoga and the Vedic teachings. Like the phrase "holding space", it has become ubiquitous in certain communities and often used casually or habitually.

The concept of Namaste is difficult to articulate and translate because Sanskrit is an ancient language that contains incredible complexity, wisdom and insight around the Invisible, Intangible and Divine Nature of the Universe.

A very basic interpretation of Namaste is:

“When the divine in me sees the divine in you, we are one”.

My quiet practice of Namaste is about recognizing another person’s divine nature, no matter the circumstances – for richer or poorer, for better or worse, in sickness and in health. I wish to see their Light even when I can see their suffering. I wish to activate compassion, rather than pity.

Have you ever been looked at with pity? It is different from Compassion because it lacks understanding and connection.

Pity makes us feel like someone is looking down at us from a great height. They cannot comfort us because they stand on top of a mountain of ignorance. They are separate from us.

Compassion makes us feel like someone is with us, witnessing our pain with love and understanding. They are not separate from us; they are not better than us. They ARE us.

In my work, I help people find understanding and compassion for their life experiences by taking them on a biographical journey. As we lovingly review the events that have happened and the callings that they feel, they are able to transform wounds into wisdom and chaos into meaning.

As Victor Frankl discovered in the concentration camps of WWII, it is possible to create meaning from our suffering. He noticed that those who managed to find meaning and purpose, were more likely to survive the pain of their circumstances. He also saw how quickly a person would decline and die if they lost touch with that meaning.

I can personally attest to how suffering creates visceral compassion.

This is a real and lived compassion that cannot be acquired from reading books or studying theory. There are many levels of awakening and understanding that came from enduring pain directly.

This kind of lived compassion also reduces the act of “spiritual by-passing”.

This is when we dismiss someone’s suffering or avoid difficult realities by invoking spiritual terms or ideas. It’s when we pay lip service to the Gods yet refuse to acknowledge the hardships of being human.

In most cases, people are genuinely trying to uplift, provide guidance or comfort someone yet this kind of help may come across as impractical, superficial or lacking compassion.

But acknowledging someone’s divine nature is not about offering empty words or ideas.

It is a profound realization that transforms the relationship from fear to respect, and pity to compassion. It is an energetic shift that is extremely healing and beautiful.

I am eternally grateful that my beloved friend Dhyanna is one of my sacred witnesses.

She is genuinely interested in my life and able to hold space for all that happens. She knows my soul essence so I feel seen, loved and understood regardless of circumstance.

She respects my divine nature so she is able to bear witness to my human suffering. She lives in another country yet her unconditional love is felt at all times. I am also her sacred witness, confidante and admirer.

With infinite wonder, I feel seen and appreciated on a soul-level by many kindred spirits.

Even when we are separated by time and distance, our love is felt because it transcends physical reality.

It transcends human limitations; it transcends words or actions.

It even transcends conflicts, misunderstandings and hurts.

When we see and interact through our soul, we transmit Love.

This is the ultimate offering.

My wishes for you and your loved ones:

May you remember that the Soul is real.

May you see and understand each other's true essence.

May you create beauty and meaning through your soul connections and expressions.

May you recognize the divine wisdom in the cycle of Life.

May the genius of birth, growth, decay and death inspire your awe.

May you be reverent witnesses for each other's experiences, both sacred and profane.

May you feel how your love IS transmitted beyond the limits of time and space.

May you feel the magic in this soul work...