

Don't Sing Happy Songs to a Heavy Heart

A friend recently broke down sobbing when we were talking.

She said, "I hate my life. I know I need to find joy in it, but I can't. Everyone tells me I need to come to terms with what's happened, that I need to cheer up and move on. But that makes it even harder. I feel that I need to be happy or I'm going to be judged."

As I listened, I was convicted. *In my efforts to pull other friends out of the pit, I've tried to hurry their grieving along.* I was reminded of Proverbs 25:20, "**Whoever sings songs to a heavy heart is like one who takes off a garment on a cold day, and like vinegar on soda.**"

How do you feel when you take off a garment on a cold day? Exposed. Unsafe. Frigid. When we are stripped of our protection, we are exposed to the elements. Forcing someone to listen to happy songs when they are suffering can leave them feeling alone, misunderstood and unprotected.

Vinegar on soda leads to an eruption; when we keep trying to make sad people happy, they can explode in anger. Our efforts to cheer them up can feel heartless.

Singing happy songs to a heavy heart is cruel. Don't tell grieving people that their pain is a gift. Don't make them sing praise songs when they don't want to. Don't tell them that other people are suffering more than they are.

Those things may be true. But when trying to come to terms with loss, someone rushing the process along is never helpful. **People need space to grieve and to process what they're facing without feeling judged.** Everyone grieves differently; even couples who have lost a child each experience unique grief. Proverbs 14:10 tells us that, "Each heart knows its own sadness."

So instead of singing happy songs to a heavy heart, sit and listen. Pray. Empathize if you can and be quiet if you can't.

My friend Christa Wells wrote a song, *Come Close Now*, about how to enter into our friends' pain, being willing to draw close and just sit with them. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gLDUO_mVYb4

Come Close Now reminds me that I shouldn't be afraid of sounding foolish - I just need to show up when people are suffering. The lyrics, some of which are included here, convicted me:

I'm afraid of the space where you suffer
Where you sit in the smoke and the burn
I can't handle the choke or the danger
Of my own foolish, inadequate words
I'll be right outside if you need me
Right outside

...

Shall I brave the heat and come close with you now?
Can I come close now?

...

Lay down our plans
Lay down the sure-fire fix
Grief's gonna stay awhile,
There is no cure for this
We watch for return,
We speak what we've heard
We sit together, in the burn
...

As Christa shows us, we can lighten our friends' burdens when we are willing to come close. But they may need our invitation to start speaking. Sometimes we need to listen as they talk about what's hard. What they've lost. How they feel.

One way to start the conversation could be, "This must be so hard. If this had happened to me, I'd be tempted to give in to bitterness, anger or self-pity. How are you feeling?" Sharing our own struggles and temptations invites sufferers to speak, knowing they won't be judged.

If our grieving friends do speak, let them talk without interrupting or correcting. Invite them to share their inner dialogue. To name their fears. To voice what they've been telling themselves about their suffering. We talk to ourselves all day long, either speaking words of fear, despair and anger or courage, resolve and hope. What we tell ourselves matters. And whether we invite the Lord into this dialogue matters as well.

It's a fine balance, but when you listen, also point them to the Lord. ***We all need reminders that God is with us in the fire. (Isaiah 43:2) We all need to know he will never leave us. (Hebrews 13:5-6). We all need assurance that the Lord is doing things in and through our pain that one day we will see and rejoice. (2 Cor 4:17-18).***

Don't overthink your words, as if they are the only hope for your friends. ***The best thing you can do is pray, because only the Lord can deliver them. When you pray, pray for their healing (James 5:16), their health and well-being (3 John 1:2). But also pray for spiritual blessings like increased faith (Luke 22:32), being sanctified through their suffering (John 17:17) and being strengthened by the Spirit, filled to the measure of all the fullness of God (Eph 3:14-19).***

I'm not an expert on knowing how to pray or what to say, but I have seen suffering from different angles. I've discouraged suffering friends and I've been wounded by people trying to encourage me. ***I know the power of prayer, the importance of having friends show up, and the gift of having friends process my tangled thoughts with me.***

This is what I've learned: Be gentle with your grieving friends, and don't press them to talk or to count their blessings when they're not ready. Climb down into the pit with them. Sit with them in their pain. (Job 2:13) Comfort them as the Lord has comforted you (2 Cor 1:4). And above all, pray without ceasing. (1 Thess 5:17).