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WHAT TO DO WHEN SOMEONE HAS A MELTDOWN

Providing Support, Stability, Truth, and Prayer

by DON PUCIK

ONE EVENING DURING THE SUMMER of 2012, I was making a nine-hour drive home after a difficult visit with my father. Lying unconscious for days in a hospital room, he was not expected to live. No one knew when death would come, and I couldn't wait any longer. I needed to go. Two hours after I left, I got the call that he had died. I could not control my grief. I had to pull over and stop repeatedly because the tears clouded my vision. I prayed aloud and struggled to process what I was experiencing with the Lord, but my heart was broken, and the sense of loss was unbearable. I was having a meltdown.

I spoke with family members and friends during that long evening in the car. Each conversation was like a lifeline in an ocean of emotional chaos. Then I got a call from a friend that God used to help me. I began to regain a sense of God's presence and His peace. My grieving process had just begun, but my meltdown ended during that phone conversation. Why?



WHAT IS A MELTDOWN?

A MELTDOWN OCCURS when someone is overwhelmed mentally and emotionally. Confronted with a situation beyond their control, people in crisis can quickly become helpless or hopeless (or both). The crisis can arrive as a single catastrophic event, or it can form through a gradual series of separate events, building in pressure and intensity until a person “melts down.” Normal reasoning and coping skills are suspended. Decision-making becomes extremely difficult. The crisis “rocks the world” for the affected person, dominating every waking thought and provoking powerful emotions.

Meltdowns happen because of unbearable and unexpected life situations. A wife discovers her husband has been having an affair. A man receives a pink slip after 33 years with the same employer. A friend receives a terminal cancer diagnosis. A neighbor’s son shoots and kills his father. A teenage daughter tells her parents she’s pregnant. A man dies on the way home in a traffic accident, leaving a widow and three children. Although the causes of the crises may be very different, the initial ministry needs of the hurting are often the same.

FOUR NEEDS YOU CAN MEET

WHEN THE CALL COMES for you to be at the side of someone having a meltdown, you may not feel qualified to help. Turn first to the Lord who is the “God of all comfort” (2 Cor. 3:3). He has promised to supply you with everything you need to serve Him. (See 2 Pet. 1:3.) He is sufficient! Trust Him to work through you to meet the needs you will encounter. During a meltdown, people need support, stability, truth, and prayer.

1. Support. Overwhelmed by a crisis, many people struggle to express themselves and to make decisions. They need a compassionate person who will listen to their story or their silence, assuring them that it’s OK to share (or not share). After the initial impact of the crisis, affected persons may need help navigating their next steps. Protect them from being forced or rushed to make a decision that can wait, while affirming their ability to make those decisions that cannot wait. Practical ministry — like providing cooked meals or mowing the yard — reduces the stress on someone who is already overloaded by a crisis.

2. Stability. Most of us live in a world that is “safe” and that can be understood. During a crisis, an individual’s perception of the world around them can collapse. It is no longer a safe place. The trajectory of life has changed, and the future becomes unclear and uncertain. However, your physical

presence will often be an anchor in the storm. How long should you stay? The answer depends on if the crisis is still unfolding and if the person has someone else who helps provide a stable environment. I have stayed overnight in hospital waiting rooms knowing family members were facing an end-of-life decision, unwilling to leave them alone. On other occasions, I have waited in someone’s home for hours until a relative or friend arrived who provided a sense of safety and stability for the person in crisis.

3. Truth. Meltdowns cause people to become extremely vulnerable to deception and manipulation. We are engaged in a spiritual war, and we have an enemy that lies and attempts to blind us to the truth. Doubts and questions can form that undermine faith. You may be asked, “Why did God allow this to happen to me?” Don’t argue or try to defend God. I often reply, “I don’t know that I can adequately answer your question, but I do know this: He loves you. He is here. He has sent me to help you get through this time.” Christians are exposed to the same kind of troubles in this world as everyone else, with one major difference: God has not left us alone in our trouble! (See John 14:18.) Read verses from the Bible that assure God’s presence and activity during times of crisis (e.g., Ps. 34:18).

4. Prayer. A.W. Tozer is credited with saying, “Sometimes when we get overwhelmed we forget how big God is.” Prayer is a way of regaining our perspective during a crisis. During a meltdown, all we can see is our problem, but when we pray, that can change! By gently leading overwhelmed people to pray, we put them in touch with the One who is greater than any problem.

On that dark night in 2012, what did my friend do that made a difference? He met needs I had for support, stability, truth, and prayer! When I answered his call, I could hear the deep concern in his voice. He listened. He assured me I was going to get through this. He gently pointed me to the Lord and reminded me of His care for me. He prayed with me. Although I would grieve for months to come, my friend’s act of compassion that night on the road helped me get through the initial tsunami of emotions associated with a meltdown. ☺

For further reading, check out H. Norman Wright’s *The Complete Guide to Crisis & Trauma Counseling: What to Do and Say When It Matters Most!* (Bethany House, 2011) or *What to Say When You Don’t Know What to Say* (Harvest House, 2014).

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