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## COMMENTARY

# Maggie Mulqueen: Here's how we can show up for others during a hard time

By Maggie Mulqueen  
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The first and most important thing to remember about showing up is that at its core, it is an offer to listen to another person. (Delmaine Donson/Getty Images)

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Over and over again in my psychotherapy practice, I hear the lament, “I don’t know what to say.” When heartbreaking events happen on either a personal or public scale, such as a medical diagnosis or mass shooting, there is a need for people to *show up* in some capacity to help, be it to lend emotional support or provide direct care. Unfortunately, many people find themselves paralyzed or, worse, pulling away from the grieving person out of a sense of inadequacy.

Our failures to show up in words or deeds for friends, family or communities have lasting implications not only for these relationships but also society as a whole. In our broken world, we need to enhance our connections, not shrink from them. Developing the skills to support people in pain is an estimable endeavor.

The first and most important thing to remember about showing up is that at its core, it is an offer to listen to another person. Showing up can be as much, if not more, about listening as it is about knowing what to say or do. Being present for someone’s pain involves opening your heart and closing your mouth. Too often, people want to smooth over the hurt as a way to reduce their own discomfort.

As a trained therapist, I know firsthand how difficult it can be to tolerate hearing the depth of someone’s feelings. Sitting with another person’s feelings takes practice but provides the potential benefit of drawing closer to that person. When we reduce our care to emojis on Facebook, we constrict the conversation from the outset. It’s effort, not expertise, that counts.

Initiating contact is the onus of the helper. Whenever I feel unsure of what to do, I say, “I don’t know what to say, but that is no excuse for doing nothing. So, I am

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here to listen if you want to talk.” But not everyone wants to talk, and usually verbal help isn’t all that’s needed.

Offering concrete help can be a lifeline at this time, such as getting groceries or providing babysitting. In the throes of a crisis, people often don’t even know what they need. Something such as, “I’d like to bring over dinner and I can leave it or we can eat it together, whichever feels more helpful right now,” gives people agency over their own needs while providing support. Taking over tasks — such as writing a group email with updates for family and friends or creating a schedule for rides to doctor’s appointments — is a way to ease someone’s burden.



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Showing up for another person involves a commitment. Beyond the initial outpouring of sympathy, people’s pain lasts much longer than our brief attention spans. It’s not just the holidays or anniversaries that can be hard; the odd Tuesday when someone feels alone can be worse.

When others answer the call to show up, that can have the added benefit of easing the burden on whomever might be in the role of principal caretaker. Caretaker fatigue is very real, and supporting them is another way of contributing meaningful help. In other words, help does not have to be given directly to the hurting person in order to be helpful. In a larger context, communities benefit from ongoing support, not just the initial surge to grab headlines.

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Leaning in to someone else's hurt is a vulnerable act that is not without risk. For example, showing up can involve sacrifice. It might be something as small as needing to change one's plans to something more significant such as reprioritizing where one puts their energy for an extended period of time. People need to be heard and helped when they are hurting. Giving our time is one of the most generous ways of supporting another person.

Finally, showing up can also be rewarding. Perhaps the greatest gain from showing up is learning that our capacity for meaningful connection is deep — deep enough to sustain others and, hopefully, ourselves during the dark days that befall us all at some point in life.

Rather than retreating behind the veil of not knowing what to say, we should challenge ourselves to show up.

*Maggie Mulqueen, Ph.D., is a psychologist who has written for many outlets, including CNN Opinion, NBC NewsThink and The Boston Globe.*

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