

Reach out for help

When English poet John Donne penned the line “no man is an island” 400 years ago, he showed a remarkable insight into the human condition.

For us modern folk, it’s important to remember that we humans are not islands, and that at times of trauma and stress, the most important gift we can give is to reach out and give the lifeline of human contact.

We have a basic need to reach out to someone in times of stress. It may not seem to make any difference to the tragedy we are facing, but it does change the way we handle it.

Reaching out to someone in distress allows you to be in touch with others who have similar experiences. This then takes away the terrible isolation you can feel when you are experiencing a tragedy, because it’s easy to feel alone.

Sometimes people close up and find they can’t reach out for help. These people are rationalising to themselves that no one else could possibly understand the depth of their pain, so what’s the point of talking about it?

It’s a defence mechanism against the pain they are feeling, but it’s not very helpful. If they are able to let someone else in, the pain can be shared and the burden becomes easier.

The idea of travelling the road with someone facing a tragedy is valuable because it enhances coping mechanisms.

Sometimes it’s someone out of left-field who can be the most helpful. It may be a person you don’t know well or a stranger who has experienced something similar who reaches out to sustain you.

In situations where families are trying to deal with a trauma, such as a case of terminal cancer or an unexpected death, the best support sometimes comes from someone a little outside the family. That’s because family members are putting on a brave face and being strong for each other, so they need someone outside this circle with whom they can let down their guard and express how they are feeling.

They need an outside person who they don’t have to support, because the outsider’s role is to support them. It’s an essential relationship because the outside friend is not there to fix the unfixable.

But they can travel the road with you, listen to you and give you the security that Donne knew every human needed, because none of us is an island.

Survival tips

- **Humans need to be able to reach out to other humans in times of distress**
- **Sharing the burden will lighten the load, even though it may not solve the tragedy being faced.**
- **An outside friend, rather than a family member, is often the best source of help.**