

Do-Gooding gone bad!



18 Tips for Visiting Sick People, So You Won't Make Them Sicker

Sally Franz

(excerpt from upcoming book Scrambled Legs)



First of all, let's distinguish between categories of the infirm. People with, say, a leg in a cast where part of them is in pain, but a great deal of them is in fair shape (this can go for people recuperating from various surgeries as well). These people usually are ready for longer visits from friends. These patients can read and participate in long conversations. They are more injured than chronically ill. People in this group know when they will be going home and back to work.

The next group are people who are profusely doped up, have no clue or care as to what day it is and are in severe pain. This group includes multiple broken bones, neurological problems, spinal damage, burns, transplants, cardio, pulmonary, and anything that has its own ward. These people generally are best at shorter visits and less conversation.

For all patients, please approach them with care. Do not rush to hug them and thereby dislodge tubes, wires, etc. Do not attempt to sit on their bed unless invited, as you may be plopping down on injured parts, or urine bags.

PLEASE do not pat, rub or contact any body parts unless invited to do so. It usually doesn't occur to someone who is sick to say, "Oh and don't grab the wire that goes from my reconstructed kneecap to the traction bar."

Try not to look horrified when you see them. Your horror only adds to their hopelessness. Look into their eyes, if their face is not recognizable. Find the person you love inside there somehow and address that child within. If their face is bandaged touch a finger tip, whisper in their ear.

If they are in a coma. TALK TO THEM! I met a man who had been in a coma for 13 years. When he came to (the day they were going to pull the plug) he said he could hear everything, EVERYTHING, people said within earshot for all those years. It may not be true for everyone, but assume it is.

You have selflessly made the trip all the way to see this person. When you come into the room try to keep it all about them. I know it is overwhelming and brings up all your stuff. But ditch the chatter about how sad it makes YOU feel to see them like this.

This is not about you. Jettison all verbiage that starts with, "I know just how you feel. It reminds of the time when I..."

If you can't visit them because they are in isolation, or you are too sick to be there, then have someone hold up a cell phone to their ear and talk to them about the great memory you have of a fun time together.



Visiting Pointers- things you can do that are really helpful

1. **See how you can be an advocate.** I once was with a friend who was dying and all he wanted was some Tums™ for indigestion. The hospital staff went on and on about why this was not good for his health. Finally I got a doctor and said, ‘look this guy has about 48 hours left. Let’s all be grown-ups here. Get him the blankety-blank Tums™.’ Which they did, and which he could not have done for himself because they wouldn’t listen to him, he’s just the patient. By the way, the Tums™ made him very happy, he died soon afterwards.

2. **Sing to comfort people.** Or bring uplifting music. I am baffled by visitors who turn on the TV so they aren’t bored all the while the patient is grogged out of their gourd having all this confusing (mostly violent or inane) noise battered into their heads. STOP ALREADY. Bring jazz. Bring classical. Bring love songs. Have three of you come in and sing rounds. Think about creating an atmosphere of gentle peace, joy and harmony. This is generally not loud (unless it’s Crosby Stills and Nash, then let ‘er rip).

3. **Nurture people in hospitals.** How do you nurture children? You comb their hair. You rub cream on their backs. You wash between their toes. You bring yourself to them. Read Robert Frost, Maya Angelou. Look at family photos. You giggle and smile and you play games. You are present. You are in the “now” in the moment. You are not in your head about the bills, about the leaky faucet, or your divorce 16 years ago. You look into their eyes and watch them with joy. You delight in their curiosity and discovery. Somewhere in the person who lays before you is a child. Ask them what they wish they could do, what they love the most. Be totally there for them while you are visiting.

4. **Be with people.** Conversation is overrated. My sister tells a story, that I flat out don’t remember. But she swears it’s true that once when she was in the hospital with hepatitis I came up to her house, took care of her kids and came to the hospital to visit. She says that I arrived in her hospital room with a tube of tropical scented cream and gave her a foot and leg massage. She never forgot it. It was so natural for me, it really has no place in my memory. But that experience for her made the difference between feeling hopeless and alone and seeing the light at the end of her dark tunnel. And the kicker? She can’t remember a thing I said (and I know me, I’m sure I talked the entire time).

5. **You don’t say.** (Conversations not worth having.) You ever get those Christmas letters about the family that can do no wrong? Johnny is going to Harvard at fifteen and Sue Ellen is a Rhodes Scholar at ten, blah, blah, blah. When my life was lost in space and time and I was in excruciating pain all I wanted was a kind smile and someone to hold my hand. I did NOT want a litany of how the rest of the world had gone merrily along with their lives and left me in the dust. After all, since I was only awake for a total of about 45 minutes a day, it took me a lot longer to sense a week had gone by

than for people on the outside world. I imagine folks waking up from comas have the same sensation...“what day, month, season, year did you say it is?” I really hate being left out and left behind. I hate it even more to be reminded of the fact.

6. Zip it. (Another conversation not worth having.) Anything political, upsetting, bad news, financial, or stressful. If you hear anyone starting in this vein near your loved one remove them forcefully and quickly. Use the excuse that there is something the doctor wants them to know immediately, if they are stupid enough to be that insensitive, they will be flattered that they are considered privy to insider information and will likely follow you out of the room. No kidding. Get these idiots away from anyone who is critically ill. No exceptions!

At year two I was able to read the front page of the newspaper, barely. But it isn't every day because some days it is too much for me to cope with pain that unpleasant headlines can trigger. I am a big proponent of the 'La-la, I can't hear you, talk to the hand, here's a quarter call someone who cares' philosophy of life. Caring too much actually hurts me. And it most likely hurts anyone ALREADY HURTING. Those of us with no reserve (empty wells) can't give what we don't have (no matter how worthy the cause)!

An acquaintance of mine found out I was home on disability and declared I would be the perfect person to run an activist group from home. I remember thinking it would have been better if I had been run over by a steam roller. Then the world would be able to see just how broken I am.

Another person who had not talked to me for 3 years because he was busy doing his career social climbing in L.A. asked if he could have his 'person' drop off a meal? Hello, hell-no. What is that a 'sympathy pot luck'? Dude, if you can't at least show up in person, don't show up at all. I don't need pity, I need fun. And a meal is for people getting over the flu. I have a complete neurological failure that left me paralyzed and I will NEVER recover completely (excuse me for drawing negative energy to the healing process). WHATEVER!



Spiritual conversations not worth having

7. Knock off the ol' "We are all praying for your complete healing."

Great and the fact that I am NOT now healed must be whose fault? Hmm? Let's see you folks are all good-looking and prosperous. I am apparently cursed. So maybe, it's my fault, for not being good enough, cute enough, spiritual enough, fill-in-the-blank, enough? The point is you may have the strength to believe that way, but don't tell the patient who is barely conscience to do it. They don't have the energy or ability even if they have the faith.

8. Or the ol' "I'm praying for you, are you feeling better?"

Same conversation. The answer is NO. And I'll often say "yes" so we can both go about our ways from this conversation without further embarrassment. How about saying this: How can I pray for you? What is the most important issue I can go to God with for you? I am going to have faith for both of us (Just like the Centurion asked for healing for his child). Just the way Jesus raised Lazarus from the grave...he didn't ask Lazarus to do the faith work.

Okay, once again, do you pray for an amputee to have their leg grow back?

Would you walk up and say, "Is the stump growing yet?" "See any toes popping out?"

Then why do you ask chronically ill people questions like "How's that Parkinson's coming along?" "Getting the upper hand on that Alzheimer's, Gramma?"

How about a simple prayer like: God I don't know why my friend is in pain, I can't do anything for her, but I love her. I know you love her more. Help her doctors help her. Send your angels, give her sleep and peace. Comfort her. Amen.

9. Oh no, you didn't just say that! "God let this happen to you to get your attention."

Oh really? And you have this news on what authority? The Bible? Once again, read the Bible. Job did not sin. The man blind from birth did not sin. Lazarus did not sin. The women with internal bleeding did not sin, the lame, blind, deaf, possessed...did not sin, nor at any time did Jesus say, "LET THAT BE A LESSON TO YOU!" So let's be taking the mega-log telephone pole outta our own eyes and leave the splinters to God. If you were struck by a truck or MS and I said to you, "This happened to you because you didn't worship Greg the Garbage God." Would you feel loved and know you were not alone? Or would you hear Pink Floyd's lunatic laughing in your ears and be backing away from me toward the exit sign?

Spiritual love is, as spiritual love does. Become a servant. Servants do not get to judge their employers, at least not out loud. But whatever you really think, change it because that oozes through

your countenance. Maybe God has allowed this person to be where they are so that YOU will change and repent.

And for the record, if I have said that I am on God's bus or I am in His army, it's because I believe people who have a relationship with God know that "the rain falls on the just and unjust." And there really aren't a whole lot 'just' folks out there—not to the core. That means the only thing that separates me from people who suffer without God (whether it be physical or emotional pain) is that I admit I am powerless over my life and I call out for help. The help is there for everyone.

God does not do things to punish us. God does not allow horrible things to happen to see us squirm (and I know it really seems as if He does). But what I have seen God do is give peace and joy and comfort and a sense of inner calm in the midst of our own personal storms.

Piety is the enemy of the gospel. Please, the next time you want to declare that God did something to punish someone...look in the mirror and remember, "God so loved the world (and ALL its inhabitants) that He died for us." And if you were the only person in the world, he would die for you—because He would HAVE to. If any of us 'believers' had the attention past a darter snail, if we really lived an entire day with the knowledge of what God does for us in spite of our shoddy track record, our non-religious friends would be astounded. I've tried it, I get about 5 minutes into the program and my mind wanders off to ME subjects.

So how do you become someone with empathy? Clear your mind of your thoughts and pay attention to the subtle needs of the one who is sick. Perhaps a hand written note of appreciation for who they are would help. Make a commitment to help this person once a week. Do not speak. Really, talk is cheap and unimportant. Do acts of simple kindness. Ask the patient if they need anything. Be there for them as if God was the one in the bed, in the wheelchair, or in the burn ward.



“HAVE YOU EVER BEEN EXPERIENCED?”

Jimi Hendrix

Let's look at all the things you can do that would be experiential for someone in the hospital.

10. One friend brought helium balloons and taped them to the top of the mirror in my hospital room so I could see them as I was lying down. They lasted for several weeks. I have seen people tape posters to the ceiling so a person can see them. Likewise if a person is on their side or facing down put visuals in their line of site.

11. Fragrances.

A dear friend of mine was dying not too long ago. I sent flowers even though people told me it was a waste of money because she was so drugged up. I made sure they had fragrance. I then had someone hold up a cell phone and I talked to her about how much fun we had when I was little and she babysat me. “Remember the bouquets we made of Lily of the Valley and Pansy's? The nurse was startled to see my friend open her eyes and laugh.

The sense of smell is the strongest sense of all because the left nostril goes to the left side of the brain and the right to the right. That means the nerves don't switch and the message is stronger. Also the memories rooted in aromas are rooted in the long term memory. Think of cinnamon, lemons, peppermint, or wild roses. These are not only strong, they are attached to experiences. In fact, experts say that if cut up a lemon in a bowl or chew cinnamon gum while trying to memorize things, it will “stick” longer. Try to think about which smells will bring back the best memories. For me if my sister brought in a dab of Shalimar perfume I would remember all the fun my sisters and I had getting ready for special parties. To this day English Leather cologne makes me think of Joe Gallagher in High School.

If fragrances are not good for the patient, say they are on breathing apparatus, then there are fragrance free creams and lotions that just plain feel good!

12. Posters, photos, any visuals that are beautiful, fun or represent a hobby your patient has interest in: golf course, cats, dogs, fishing. (Just make sure it doesn't bring up any traumatic memories- like if they lost a leg from a shark bite while surfing...then ix-nay on the urfing-say pics.)

13. Spicey-a-spicey meatball! If they can eat foods, how about bringing a basket of spices: Dill weed, garlic, lemon pepper, basil, nutmeg. They make these half sizes now that are just perfect. A few spices can make institutional food passable.

14. Food glorious food. Speaking of taste, how about lemon, clove, cinnamon or if they are off sugar, home-grown tomatoes, oranges, or apples; something that is fresh and flavorful. Even if it's just a tiny taste, it will make a huge difference.

15. Play nail parlor, beauty shop, barber shop. Nothing feels as good as clean! If you can scoot them down put a pile of towels under their head and wash their hair with a sponge a section at a time. Wet it, suds it. Rinse it. Cream rinse and rinse, and pat dry. NAILS. I did not know that nurses and staff don't cut your nails if they grow long. So if this is a long stay, see what you can do as family or bring in a specialist.

16. A Picture is worth a 1,000 words! If a person is on lots of drugs, picture magazines are about the most that can be comprehended. In fact, if you want to help them out, just make up a picture book of things they like, photos of food, travel sites, gardens. Buy magazines in their favorite hobby area and put the photos in an album. I couldn't read for almost 6 months after I got out of the hospital. I was too embarrassed to tell people who brought me reading material, so I just thanked them and put it in my closet.

It reminded me of the movie, The Other Side of the Mountain, when the skier who broke her neck was in the rehab facility. She showed off to her (soon-to-be-ex) boyfriend that she could grab a potato chip from a bowl, and he had brought her a new pair of ski boots for the next season...talk about unclear on the concept!

17. Get a grip. A severely sick person does not have a bad cold. Do not bring them gifts to keep them occupied until the sneezing stops. Find out from the family where they are as far as responding to the outside world. If you are family, come to serve, to nurture and to soothe. A cool cloth on the forehead, a lullaby, a photo of a happy child they know. When you've been drugged out of your gourd, it is hard to stay conscious, never mind to recall events. Here's a tip I learned from an Alzheimer's counselor: Don't ask, "do you remember such and such?" Instead try: "I remember when we did such and such, we had so much fun." It's called user friendly conversation. "I like chocolate ice cream, do you want to try some?" When you are sick decisions are nearly impossible, you are using all your decision power on things such as: I am deciding to live this second, now this one, and another one.

18. The Platinum Rule: Do unto others as *they would have you* do unto them. It might be different than what you would want done to you, so ask the person if they are able to speak or ask someone who has suffered what they are suffering. And remember, most people want to be treated with respect (that means, talked to honestly, openly, fairly and not talked about while they are present).

All in all, it's not the words the patient remembers, it's the intention of our hearts. You don't need eloquent words or even religion for that. As the Beatles say, "all you need is love!"