

QUARTERLY

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The death of a friend can intensify loneliness

By Timothy Merrill, Editor

One of the most difficult periods in the life of a homebound person is when he or she receives news of the death of a friend.

Already feeling isolated by their physical limitations and their confinement to a small room in an assisted-living facility or at home, they now feel their aloneness even more deeply.

The church family can be a source of immeasurable help when someone loses a friend. Some important things to remember are:

1. *The value of listening.* Think about what it means to be a good friend, and then be that friend to the homebound. They need emotional support, and listening to them talk about their departed friend, their sense of loss and their renewed fears is very helpful.

2. *Let them know they are entitled to grieve.* Friends take the loss of a confidante and companion in the same way one might lose a family member. Grief is okay.

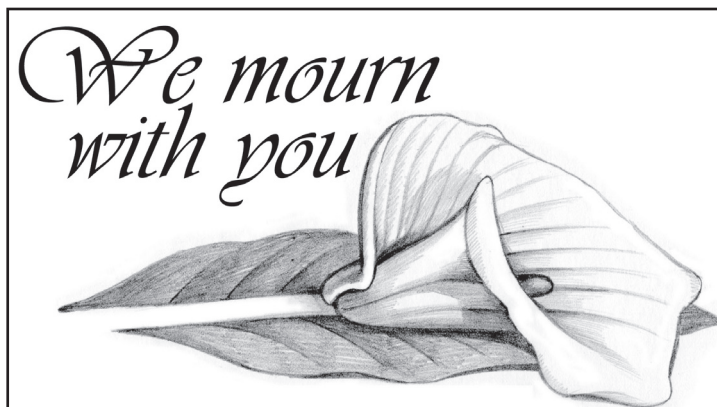
3. *Be prepared if they start to blame themselves.* According to Jan Yager, in her book *Friendships*, many

times, friends will develop a case of the “if onlys.” They will harbor regrets and remorse that they no longer have an opportunity to tell the departed how much they loved him or her. They’ll blame themselves, and they might wish they could’ve been more active in the life of their friend.

4. *Send concrete messages of love.* This is the time to make sure someone pays a call upon the grieving person. Organize a sympathy card shower. Be sure that the church is well represented at the funeral, and invite friends to

make a telephone call every day for a while.

5. *Let them know the church is keeping them in their prayers.* It is very comforting to know that the power of prayer is upholding you as you journey through your day. Make it clear that the grieving homebound person is on the active prayer list, and has been placed on the prayer chain, too.



The death of a friend is a critical time for anyone, especially someone already isolated and alone. This is a redemptive moment for the church to step in and take care of the spiritual and emotional needs of one of its members.

Can we protect the aging brain?

We are all growing older every day, including our brains. Is it possible to protect the brain as it ages so that it continues to function at high levels with little diminishment of memory? Truth is, what people fear most about aging is losing their mental acuity. Now, according to new studies, there's good news for elderly folks in good health: They will likely enjoy their golden years with memories intact.

People in the greatest danger of cognitive decline include those with diabetes, cardiovascular disease or a gene called apolipoprotein E $\epsilon 4$, which recent studies have linked to Alzheimer's disease, says Mary Haan, M.P.H., director of the Center for Aging and Health at the University of California-Davis. Elderly people with these diseases can lose their short-term memory up to eight times as fast as their healthier counterparts. But older adults with family histories of Alzheimer's disease or a high risk of cardiovascular disease aren't doomed to senility: Haan believes that they can fend off age-related memory loss by exercising regularly and eating a healthful diet.

Indeed, new research published in the journal *Neurology*, suggests that older people who regularly exercise at moderate to intense levels may have a 40 percent lower risk of developing brain damage linked to strokes, certain kinds of dementia, and mobility problems. The study showed that seniors who exercised at higher levels were significantly less likely to show

brain damage caused by blocked arteries that interrupt blood flow — markers for strokes — than people who exercised lightly.

A good night's sleep is another factor which may help to protect the aging brain. Research shows that a regular pattern of eight hours of sleep per night helps protect against age-related chronic illnesses, including



memory loss.

The church can be involved in promoting healthy lifestyles through the creation of its own recreational programs or by promoting local fitness centers and their programs. The Bible encourages us to take care of our bodies as the temple of the Holy Spirit. Perhaps the church can even partner with a fitness center to provide discounts to members.

As for the homebound, they may be beyond rigorous exercise, but exercise at any level is beneficial, and the church's homebound volunteers can encourage the homebound to do what they can, to get the rest and diet they need to have healthy bodies and active brains.

How to prepare for getting old

Ruth Molloy, 89, offers these suggestions on how to prepare for old age:

- Keep your doctors on their toes.
- Stay in touch with longtime friends and find some new ones who are younger than you.
- Never refuse help, but don't overdo it. If someone offers to buy you something at the grocery store, answer, "Three bananas." Don't give an entire list.
- Don't complain too much. It gets boring. But don't be a saint. That's boring, too.
- Read old magazines. They make you feel younger.
- Always have something to look forward to.

Adds Molloy: "What I'm looking forward to now is my 90th birthday. I'm getting my invitation list ready, and it's a long one. If I'm dead by then, it will be a memorial service. But either way, there will be cake!"

—cited in TIME magazine.

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