Eight Tips for Stephen Ministers’ Care during Social Distancing

Since Stephen Ministry began in 1975, Stephen Ministers and Stephen Leaders have provided high-quality care following a wide range of disasters. In some ways, COVID-19 is unlike any prior crisis. Because of the necessity of social distancing, normal channels for care have been restricted. Even so, many of the needs for care are the same or even greater, with people facing much fear, stress, and anxiety. Stephen Ministers are very well equipped to meet those needs for care.

Here are eight suggestions for Stephen Ministers on how to support your care receivers when it’s necessary to care from a distance.

1. Be Intentional

Intentionally stay in contact with your care receiver, maintaining your weekly caring visits, recognizing their needs, and taking the necessary steps to continue providing quality care. Rather than just asking whether the care receiver would like to talk, communicate assertively, saying something like, “Let’s arrange a time to talk by phone so we can keep our weekly caring visits going. Would the usual time work best for you, or is there a better time?”

2. Use Voice or Video—Not Text

Although being together in person is the best way to offer care, doing so isn’t possible right now given the need for social distancing. Using phone or video calls is the next best thing, since they let you talk in real time, hear the other person’s voice, and potentially see the other person’s face. Text-based methods such as email or texting are much less effective for providing quality care; if they’re used at all, they should be limited to basic communications like confirming times to call.

3. Be Aware of Communication Limitations

Whatever communication tool you use, consider any limitations and how they might affect your ministry. With a phone call, for instance, you can’t see your care receiver’s face, so you’ll need to rely more on vocal cues. With video, you can see your care receiver, but you have only a limited view on screen, and lag time and lost connections can make communication challenging. And with either tool, you may need to take extra precautions to preserve confidentiality. Being aware of such limitations allows you to better adapt.

4. Be Fully Present

One of the greatest gifts you can give someone in your caregiving is being fully present for the person, even when you can’t be there physically. By giving the care receiver your full, undivided attention, you communicate that you care, you’re there for them, and they are not alone. So, resist the urge to try to multitask by preparing dinner or...
checking your newsfeed while talking with your care receiver—people can tell whether your attention is truly focused on them.

5. Listen Actively

Active listening is among a Stephen Minister’s most important skills. When you’re communicating remotely, it becomes all the more important. Pay close attention not only to your care receiver’s words but to tone of voice, pauses, facial expressions (if you’re using video), and other cues. Don’t be reluctant to ask them to repeat something if necessary. Using all your listening skills shows you care and value them and helps you understand fully what your care receiver is thinking and feeling.

6. Explore and Validate Feelings of Grief

In addition to any preexisting needs for care, your care receiver may also be dealing with grief related to the crisis. Many people right now are grieving the abrupt changes to their normal life, even if they haven’t lost loved ones. Some may feel guilty about grieving while others are suffering more severe losses. The best way to help is to validate your care receiver’s feelings and experiences—assuring them it’s okay to feel the way they do. Explore any feelings of grief together and offer the validation your care receiver needs.

7. Pray

Definitely pray for the person you are caring for. If you believe it would meet the person’s needs and they’d be open to it, you can also ask whether you can pray with them as well. If they are open to praying during the call but you feel awkward about it, do your best to move past those feelings and include praying together as part of your care. Even on a phone or video call, the power of prayer can be a tremendous source of comfort.

8. Take Care of Yourself

In order to provide quality care in the midst of a crisis, it’s key to remember to pay attention to your own physical, emotional, and spiritual needs. That makes supervision even more important right now, so stay in contact with your Supervision Group Facilitator by phone or video chat. Also, check in with your fellow Stephen Ministers and your Stephen Leaders regularly, listen to each other, share how you’re doing, and provide the mutual care and support that will help keep your caring ministry going at a high level—remembering to maintain confidentiality.

May God bless you as you continue to carry out your ministry, bringing God’s healing love to your care receivers.

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