



“Thoughts and Prayers”

“Thoughts and Prayers”...how do you feel about this expression of sympathy?
An observation and opinion by Nan Zastrow

I was recently asked what my feelings are about using the cliché “Our thoughts and prayers are with you.” We say it because it’s the right thing to say. Everyone accepts this condolence in good faith, right? I guess I never really thought about it before as I always considered it a respectable, comforting phrase that had a positive intention associated with it.

Yes, it is a cliché. And, yes, we’ve all heard it a hundred plus times. It’s a common closing comment used in media news after tragedy. Likewise, in our communities, public officials will repeat the well-known phrase after tragic events. And, of course, we’ve repeated it to family and friends facing loss or difficult times in their lives. Acknowledging that someone is suffering is an important human response that connects us and consoles us through adversity.

The word “Thoughts” typically indicates that you have paused to consider someone’s situation and recognize the uncertainty someone may be facing. It’s a word that shows concern and positive wishes for one’s well-being (death, illness, disaster etc.). The word “Prayers” represents a spiritual connection that suggests that you are praying on their behalf to God (or a higher power) to help the person in their time of need.

What I didn't know was the negative backlash online that suggests that the phrase is hollow and insincere because it isn't followed up with action. (usually politically motivated.) I was disappointed that somehow our society could turn something comforting into a subject for debate. Therefore, on the deeper side of my brain, I decided to consider how I really felt about the phrase.

It goes without saying that there are many clichés we repeat to the bereaved or those facing life crises that may cause someone to shutter. The phrase may be:

Personally painful...("He's in a better place now.");

Lack good judgment...(You can have more children.);

Test one's progress in healing from their situation...("How are you doing?");

And, challenge the strength of one's faith... ("God wouldn't give you more than you can handle.")

Personally, I'm comforted by the words and trust that someone has empathy with my experience. Though they can't change the situation; they wish for healing and peace in my future. In other words, I assume that many of those who repeat this phrase (to me) truly will follow through and say a prayer. At least, I know that is what I do when I say this or write this to someone.

Everyone will experience their own life-changing event at some time. However, expressing how you feel for someone else's situation may be difficult to put into words. We can't really relate to their situation as their story may be much deeper than we know on the surface. Therefore, we rely on phrases that we believe convey a message of comfort and support. Though this cliché may be overused; in some cases, it means no disrespect. The phrase acknowledges, shows sympathy, and empathizes with someone during their difficult time. It remains an expression of sadness and hope that the person will recover from their situation—and is a verbal indication of moral support. Cliches have a role...and even when repeated a thousand times...we know exactly what is meant by them!

Prayer reminds us that "we wish things were different". Thoughts and prayer are actions when we truly follow up, after saying such, that exemplifies our sincerity. I read online that "prayer is the idea of seeking help from outside of ourselves." It's a form of action by putting our trust in a higher power and through choice, gives us the opportunity to act and make a difference.

What kind of everyday action could you take? Action truly does show that you care and your words were sincere. There are simple ways to put action to work: a phone call as a follow-up to see how the person is doing or simply checking in with him or her at a later date. Write a note or send a card. Invite the individual to lunch where you can talk more intimately about their experience and perhaps find a way you can help them. Bring them a meal. Mow their lawn. Shovel the snow. Give them a ride to an appointment. Simple actions speak volumes.

If you are using the phrase because you don't know what else to say or because you feel it's appropriate, "go for it." Most bereaved would take no offense, nor do I think they would judge your sincerity with these words. I welcome those who say "thoughts and prayers" sincerely. I believe that as divine beings we do care about others and our intentions show a desire for support, healing and peace.

About the Author

Wings-a Grief Education Ministry was founded in 1993 by Nan and Gary Zastrow, after the death of their son, Chad Zastrow, as a result of suicide. In 2018, Wings celebrated 25 years as a non-profit organization. As certified grief educators, Nan and Gary share hope for the grief journey in workshops, seminars, and presentations. Nan's writings share her vulnerability throughout her journey and reveals that a life shattered by grief can heal. Nan is the author of 6 books, a quarterly online grief eLetter, and dozens of articles published in various resources. Nan has regularly published articles in Grief Digest magazine since 2003. Visit the website: www.wingsgrief.org and the Wings Facebook page.