



Pastoral Care Tip April 2023

I love to work with people who are struggling with the realities of life. One of the best things I have learned is how to encourage people when they are down and out. I am a Stephen Minister and a leader in the church's Stephen Ministry. The Stephen Ministries head office sent out a promotion for its new publication, "The Gift of Empathy." I thought I'd share this information with you because no matter how long we've been providing pastoral care, we can always use a reminder. The following is from the Stephen Ministries Care Mail sent to its members.

"Empathy Busters to Avoid"

The words we say have a major impact on how well we show our empathy to others. Despite our best efforts to empathize, it can be all too easy to say things that have the opposite effect – what we call "empathy busters."

Here are five common empathy busters to watch out for:

1. "I know how you feel."

People told us over and over in our research that they strongly disliked this phrase. They felt like the other person was dismissing the uniqueness of their pain. In reality, nobody can ever know exactly how someone else feels, so avoid this phrase.

2. "You have a lot to be thankful for."

While it might seem helpful, encouraging someone to focus on what they have to be thankful for communicates, "You shouldn't be feeling the way you feel. Look on the bright side instead." This empathy buster invalidates the other person's feelings and can come across as judgmental.

3. "It could be worse."

As one person said, "Yes, it can always be worse, but that sure doesn't make me feel any better!" This cliché pushes people to change their mindset, which doesn't help when they're already dealing with a challenging situation.

4. “God doesn’t give you more than you can handle.”

When people are already struggling, being told that God gave them this difficult load and expects them to be able to bear it can cause a host of negative reactions. This phrase dismisses their emotions, and they’ll likely feel worse.

5. “You should / shouldn’t ...”

Empathy is about the other person—their feelings, wants, and needs. Telling someone what they should or shouldn’t do minimizes their feelings and treats them like a project instead of a person.

These empathy busters come from Stephen Ministries’ newest book, *The Gift of Empathy*. To learn more about empathy busters and how to empathize instead, get the book – available exclusively from Stephen Ministries – at thegiftofempathy.org or by calling (314) 428-2600.

Blessings,
Nancy Cowtun