

I WILL NOT BE BROKEN



5 Steps to Overcoming a Life Crisis

JERRY WHITE

"Jerry White brings his insight and experience to bear expertly for those facing life's unexpected challenges. He embodies the spirit of survivorship."

—Lance Armstrong, 7-time Tour de France winner, author of *Every Second Counts*

Please enjoy Chapter 10 of *I Will Not Be Broken: Choose Life* on us as a way of introducing you to this new book by author and survivor Jerry White and his new organization, [Survivor Corps](#). Feel free to share it with your friends, family, and readers. Be our guest.

About I Will Not Be Broken

The loss of a loved one, a painful divorce, or a serious physical injury---we must all, at one point, face tragedy---unavoidable moments that divide our lives into “before” and “after.” How do we muscle our way through tough times and emerge stronger, wiser---even grateful for our struggle? In 1984, author Jerry White lost his leg---and almost his life---in a landmine accident. He has endured the pain of loss and the challenge of rebuilding. As cofounder of Survivors Corps, White has interviewed thousands of victims of tragedy. With this book, he shares what he has learned.

White outlines a very specific five-step program to coping with disaster; to achieving strength and hope; and to turning tragedy into triumph. In their own words, his survivor friends and colleagues share their stories. It's a group that includes the well known, like Lance Armstrong, Nelson Mandela, and the late Princess Diana, and also everyday survivors. Through their stories and the author's words, the book takes readers step-by-step through the process of not only surviving tragedy and victimhood, but going on to thrive.

**HELPING OTHERS GET
THROUGH CATASTROPHE**

Or, How to Not Make Things Worse



I work with families touched by war and terror around the world. You'd think it would get easier for me to handle horrible news. You'd think I'd become immune. If only it were true. Confronting another person's tragedy is one of the hardest things a person can endure. It's filled with all sorts of "shoulds"—things that are easier said than done. I confess at times I have failed miserably to live up to my own standard, trying to demonstrate empathy in action. I never underestimate the discipline and strength required to accompany someone through their darkest hour.

When that landmine exploded on April 12, 1984, it wasn't just my personal date. It was a date for my mother, my siblings and my friends. Each of us needed to learn in real time how best to give and receive comfort from one another.

So, how do we help someone other than ourselves when trouble comes? The phone rings in the middle of the night. We hear hesitation, a tearful voice, and we know the news is not good.

"Aunt Nancy was hit by a car last night..."

“I was just attacked in my apartment...can you come to the hospital?”

“Mom had a stroke and can’t eat or speak...”

“The sonogram is showing something wrong with the baby’s heart...”

“Cousin Hank is back in rehab...”

“The funeral service is Thursday, can you make it?”

Heart in mouth, we struggle for words. *“Oh my God, I can’t believe it... Are you okay?”*

Each time I find myself in a family’s living room while they are going through a painful experience, I must pray for grace and wisdom. It takes enormous restraint to be helpful, not harmful, in the midst of a personal disaster. But I have come to believe that this is the ultimate service. Each of us, at several points in our lives, will be called on to assist others during a crisis turning point, even unto death, knowing that what we do next will have far-reaching consequences—either positive or negative. We also know that helping others makes us grow.

Still, why is it so difficult to walk with others through the “valley of the shadow of death”? Probably because we have no map and things are out of our control. We don’t want to do harm. But we must learn to become part of the supporting cast, even putting ourselves in the role of a servant. And unless you are a born Mother Teresa or professionally trained as a nurse, minister, or counselor, none of this comes naturally. It takes practice. And caregivers need support, just like survivors in crisis, as Tirza, a college student in Israel, attests:

I was nineteen when my father died suddenly. He was the dearest person in my life. After seven days of mourning, I went back to university. I remember sitting on the lawn in the sun, and another student waving and approaching, saying, hey, haven't seen you for a while. I replied so matter-of-factly, "I wasn't here for the week, my father died." Too matter-of-factly because inside I was screaming bereavement but acting too self-sufficient to reach out, let in, ask for comfort and acknowledgement of the pain.

Years later, I accompanied a close friend through her illness up to her death...The same temptation is there: to be the all-coping, all-functioning, self-sufficient person who gives support. Luckily—strange to use this word in this context—luckily, I break at one point. It is after forty-eight hours with no sleep. My friend is in the room almost unconscious with pain and refusing more help. We are on my friend's porch, going in circles. My friend's partner, the doctor and myself no longer have a clue how to get through the next few days, how to cope with this last stage with death approaching. I find myself at a complete loss. That's all I feel, lack-of-sleep, crazed and pained, and I say, "I don't know about you guys, but I need help." And, thankfully, there was someone there for me. I contacted a friend from many years back—she specializes in spiritual accompaniment of people who are terminally ill. Speaking and consulting with her gave me a lot of strength. It was exactly the kind of support I needed, so I could make more peace with this tragedy and give better support to my friend.

When you are the one suffering, the pain is yours. And there are steps you can take to get through. On the other hand, watching someone you love go through intense pain can

be even harder. You feel helpless as they writhe physically or emotionally. You must work very hard to keep emotions in check, try to understand what is really going on, and refrain from doing harm or adding to the pain.

The maddening thing is that you cannot rescue someone who's suffering. You are powerless to change the behavior or feelings of anyone but yourself. You can only assist and be present. My mother writes about watching me in a hospital bed in Israel:

I have learned the only thing you can do for a situation like this is to "bear witness"—bear witness to the agony of your beloved child. It is a form of being there and keeping company. And not go to pieces and cry out your own outrage. When I sat in the hospital room with you and witnessed your excruciating wrenching phantom pains, I wanted to scream. I wanted to sooth...I wanted to suffer for you... There was no ointment, no bandage, no pill, no magic, and no prayer that could give back what you had lost. I couldn't make this one better. I felt numb, angry, and helpless, out of control, afraid, grieving, and deserted by God. But I kept trying to make it about listening to you...

My colleague Kristan still struggles with the year she watched her father die from a rare cancer in 2005.

I am slowly getting over his death, a death that seemed premature to any one who knew him. I am, though, still sometimes having a hard time with the memory of

his pain and suffering that last month. I have a hard time with what I witnessed, watching him suffer, physically and mentally for hours and days on end. It is very hard to see a loved one suffer, and it's harder when it's your dad, the person who has always been strong and fine and fit and there for you. But I also recall the very special moments, tender or funny, we shared when he was in the hospital, and I'm grateful to have been there.

We are biologically wired to respond to the distress of our fellow human beings. A mother leaps up when her baby cries. Someone is upset, and we rub his shoulder to soothe. But before we run into the burning building, we need to consider donning some protective gear and bringing tools appropriate to work among the flames of victimization. You don't need an advanced degree. Anyone can learn skills to help others through catastrophe.

Your ability to listen is an essential gift of compassion to survivors. It can be draining, even vicariously traumatizing, to listen to someone describe in detail their personal horror. Just resist the temptation to give advice, and literally bite your tongue before offering the glib, "I understand." Allow the survivor to talk. Say, "I don't know what your loss is like, but if you want to tell me about it, I would like to listen." If a person doesn't want to talk, wait and ask again another day.

One technique, if we can call it that, is simply to "LUV" someone—Listen, Understand, and Validate.¹ This approach was developed by resilience specialists Dr. Lennis

¹ Echterling, Lennis G. et al., *Crisis Intervention: Promoting Resilience and Resolution in Troubled Times* (Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Education 2005) 17-25.

Echterling, Dr. J. Edson McKee and Dr. Jack Presbury in the Psychology Department at James Madison University. Some of the suggestions below may sound frightfully scripted, but my hunch is that most of us need a refresher course in active listening, particularly if it's been a while since we've come face to face with overwhelming pain. I've taken the liberty to paraphrase some of their guidance here.

Listen: What are some things you can do so a survivor feels listened to?

- *Watch your body language; face the person with an open and engaged posture.*
- *Maintain good eye contact, and lean toward the person with an expression of concern.*
- *Keep your composure and poise (i.e., don't gasp), even while listening to traumatic detail.*

Understand: How will a survivor know he or she has been heard and understood?

- *Repeat or paraphrase what the survivor is saying.*
- *Say what you think the survivor means and ask for a confirmation.*
- *Speak in a way that mirrors the survivor's mood and manner by using words and expressions that are similar to those used by the survivor.*

Validate: How do you convey your belief in a survivor's own strength and resilience?

- *Nod affirmatively and slowly as the person speaks.*

- *Smile with warmth and understanding (not broadly or with nervous laughter).*
- *Offer encouragers, interjecting rarely: "I see"; "Hmmm"; "Yes"; "Please, go on".*
- *Communicate your faith in the survivor's handling of the situation. You convey confidence by not dispensing glib advice or false assurances.*

When you give unsolicited advice, it sends an inadvertent message that you don't really trust the survivor to know or choose the best course of action. By offering instead a listening ear and supportive presence, you communicate respect for the survivor's own inner resources. And by bearing witness to the survivor story, you honor the individual's struggle to find meaning.

The second fundamental technique for crisis intervention is asking open-ended questions—ones that help survivors tap into images of inner strength. Our experts, Echterling, McKee and Presbury, remind crisis interveners:

Your role is neither the rescuer with all the power nor the expert with all the answers. By taking the attitude of "not rescuing" and "not knowing," you invite people in crisis to share their stories and to create their own positive resolutions...you are constantly looking for the survivor. In fact, by your manner and questions, you are inviting the person in crisis to join you in this search. To help you look for the survivor, you will be using questions, which can be powerful crisis intervention tools. Questions gather

information, of course, but more important, they communicate important messages. By asking about strengths and coping, you invite a person in turmoil to pause, reflect, and dig for material that can be used to piece together a response that holds promise for resolving the crisis.¹

When I first came across this approach to crisis intervention, I felt so relieved. Finally, I thought, some experts are advising on the basics of humanity and empathy. It wasn't your typical diagnostic approach, focusing on sickness and symptoms. Their approach draws on recent perspectives from positive psychology and emotional intelligence. It seems to me that very few people in the world of public health or humanitarianism have been trained this way. For many, it is so tempting to step in and probe for details about the crisis, because we are naturally curious about all the circumstances. But probing for *too* much detail can be counterproductive because it focuses on the victimization rather than resilience. If you have ever been interrogated by the police after a car accident or burglary, you know the drill: "*Just the facts, please!*" But when you are in the business of promoting resilience, it is far better to ask more open-ended questions that explore strengths, resources, and possibilities. Such questions will encourage the survivor to call to mind images of surviving and thriving, rather than past details of victimization. It is crucial to encourage friends and family members to search for the survivor by acknowledging the "crisis-talk" while persisting in "survivor-talk."¹

¹ Echterling, Lennis G. et al., *Crisis Intervention: Promoting Resilience and Resolution in Troubled Times* (Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Education 2005).

¹ Echterling, Lennis G. et al., *Crisis Intervention: Promoting Resilience and Resolution in Troubled Times* (Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Education 2005) 20.

Try asking a survivor such things as, “When you have had to face any trauma or danger in the past, how did you manage to handle it?” This type of question presumes inner strength and past experience. Or you could try something like, “How have you been able to cope up to now?” Again, this is a way to focus on what’s working, instead of what is broken. Our goal is to help crisis victims see themselves as survivors: inherently strong. The fact that a person is alive is already evidence of his or her ability to survive. Some questions along these lines might include: “How did you manage to handle things the way you did?” “What did you draw from inside yourself to make it through?” Ultimately, what we want to do is fuel the inner survivor rather than feed the inner victim.

Okay, by now you are recoiling from the idea of a script. And you should. Authenticity and genuine caring can’t be scripted. But knowing how to communicate with few words is a disciplined skill that can be learned, body language and all.

Navigating times of crisis with grace is like traveling to a foreign country—call it “crisis-land.” We enter a new culture in which we are unsure of the proper behavior or etiquette. And just as every country honors and mourns the dead in its own ways, each person will grieve in his or her particular way. We understand there is a universal language related to grief and loss, but we must still try to understand the specific needs and vocabulary of each survivor.

And don’t forget the value of a sense of humor. Its importance cannot be overestimated. We have all done it. Insert foot in mouth. The second the words come out, we cringe.

Sometimes they're just silly bloopers, like the time I kept calling a friend whose mother had just died, could only get an answering machine, and finally blurted out, "*Hellooooo*, anyone home? I'm just looking for a *live body* over there." *Oops*. Or the first time I was interviewing a blind woman seeking help, and I say, "I'm so glad to see you, why don't you just follow me into the other room." *Oops*. Or the time I was in line for a sumptuous luncheon buffet with a colleague in a wheelchair and say, "I'm *paralyzed* by all the options." *Oops again*. After our house was burglarized, a neighbor came to say he was very sorry to hear the news. I answered, "At least we have our health." True, but not exactly the right thing to say to someone who has just completed radiation treatments for cancer. *Even bigger Oops*. But no harm done. I've said the goofiest things, sometimes using turns of phrase I swear I never otherwise say. They just come out in the wash of crisis.

Most gaffes are just that—a mistake, a slip of the tongue from nervousness or inexperience. We don't mean any harm. The problem is that real harm can be done, even unwittingly, when we bring careless words or deeds into the area of another's pain. If we aren't careful, we can forever damage relationships, no matter how close we once were. Most of us, frankly, are never taught how to behave in the face of the deepest grief.

Individuals who have just been through a catastrophe are raw. It's as if their skin has been ripped off and nerve endings are exposed. We feel things times a thousand, and social interaction can be very painful. In the heat of the moment, our inner victim will

even search for scapegoats—somewhere to target our rage. It's a strange thing, as if we need to take personal offense and be revictimized. Even the most well-meaning gesture can be suspect. "Why did they send these; they know I hate lilies." Sound like a minefield? Not literally, but sort of. Given the importance of maintaining strong healthy relationships, we need to learn how to proceed sensitively, even cautiously, in the face of another's duress.

What do survivors say has been helpful during their tough times? I call it "empathy etiquette"—the way to support survivors in crisis by putting yourselves in their shoes. The good news is we can learn empathy etiquette, much like we can learn resilience. When we are going through something for the first time, neither we nor our friends know exactly how to behave. Nothing seems normal or real in a life-threatening storm. *Emily Post*, the etiquette guru, has some time-tested advice on this subject, particularly for families struggling with the death of a loved one. Brevity and practicality rule the etiquette path.

Persons under the shock of genuine affliction are not only upset mentally but are all unbalanced physically. No matter how calm and controlled they seemingly may be, no one can, under such circumstances, be normal. Their disturbed circulation makes them cold, their distress makes them unstrung, sleepless. Persons they normally like, they often turn from. No one should ever be forced upon those in grief, and all overemotional people, no matter how near or dear, should be barred absolutely. Although the knowledge that their friends love them and sorrow for them is a great

solace, the nearest afflicted must be protected from any one or anything which is likely to overstrain nerves already at the threatening point, and none have the right to feel hurt if they are told they can neither be of use nor be received. At such a time, to some people companionship is a comfort, others shrink from dearest friends. One who is by choice or accident selected to come in contact with those in new affliction should, like a trained nurse, banish all consciousness of self; otherwise he or she will be of no service—and service is the only gift of value that can be offered.¹

Etiquette is about making other people feel at ease. It requires a ruthless selflessness, just as Ms. Post advises: “Banish all consciousness of self.” That’s a tall order, particularly when none of us feels particularly at ease in the midst of a crisis. How do we check ourselves at the door, making comfort completely about others?

When I was young, I had no idea how to approach people in trouble—I either said nothing or the first things that came to mind. What to say to the parents of two high school classmates killed in a car crash senior year? (*I’m sorry, but were they drinking?*) What to say or do about a bulimia-induced rush to McLean Hospital in Boston, to keep a friend’s weight from dipping below a skeletal eighty-four pounds? (*Can you please eat, for me?*) Or a neighbor’s suicide attempt, requiring me to gather dishcloths and wait outside while my mother mopped up the razor-induced blood pools on a kitchen floor? (*Do you want some help with that?*) What about the gang rape of a classmate in Rhode Island? (*Are you going to be okay tonight?*) Or the chronic-fatigue visited upon an

¹ Post, Emily, *Etiquette in Society, in Business, in Politics and at Home* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1922), <http://www.bartleby.com/95/>.

athletic friend? (*Do you think might feel like playing tennis tomorrow?*) So many things were going wrong around me growing up, and no one was able to explain comprehensibly what to do or say.

When I was thirteen, the father of one of my best friends, Katie, rowed a dinghy offshore on a cold Thanksgiving weekend and shot himself in the head. It was the first time I heard the word *suicide*. The news kicked me in the gut. I didn't really understand what my parents were talking about. What was "manic depression" anyway? What did I know about helping my friend deal with her family's explosion?

My mother's demand that I go see Katie immediately made me choke up enough to feign illness. *Oh no, what would I say?* I refused to get in the car. My mother said I didn't have to stay long or say much. "Just go knock on the door, ask for Katie, and say, 'I'm sorry.' That's all. Don't worry if you cry. Jerry, this is something you must learn to do. Katie needs you." (I learned much later in life that when my own mother was thirteen, none of her school friends had said a word when her own father, whom she adored, died unexpectedly from pneumonia.)

So I went to Katie's house. The place was eerily quiet. Katie turned the corner, pale in a tired way, and a little sheepish, "Hi, Jerry."

I averted my eyes then gave her an abrupt hug. "I'm sorry about your dad." Katie looked down, whispered thanks and even smiled faintly.

This was the first date—a before-and-after moment—I remember sharing with a friend.

At the time, I didn't understand why Katie said thanks. Now I do.

People at any age are relieved and grateful for simple gestures.

Now that I am older, I can appreciate my mother's early tutorial on condolences and life etiquette. I took away from this formative experience two things: First, you must show up. Go to the place of suffering and be present. Second, keep your words simple and few: "I'm sorry."

Why is this so hard to do? Mainly because deep suffering is visceral and taps into our worst fears. It could happen to us. Thank God, it wasn't *my* husband who got hit by a car—or *my* wife who got the cancer diagnosis. We either want to run from it, fix it, or explain it away. We have to resist the temptations to do too much (*fix things*), to say too much (*overcompensate*), or to pretend too much (*acting as if nothing has really changed*).

It helps to think of grief with some detachment. Grief just is...an emotional fact. Some people talk a lot about it; others, not so much. The most important thing is to acknowledge grief without giving it permission to rule your life.

It may be disappointing, but many times people can't support us in the ways we want them to. Families are notorious on this front. No one can meet all our needs, nor read our minds. And sometimes the one person you want a hug from most is the very person who can't give it to you. Jeannie thinks she was too young to know how to ask for what she needed when her father died.

The date was May 22, 1976, five days before my thirteenth birthday. My mom picked

me up from camp. As she put the car in park she simply said, "Dad died." I don't remember her hugging me, though I'm sure she must have. I don't remember her crying, though I'm sure she must have. I just remember going through a lot of Kleenex and really not being able to believe that someone who had always been there would never be there again.

Then the really hard part started. Because he had died the day before, all the relatives were already there, filling the house. Everyone was waiting for me, wanting to see my reaction. "How is she doing?" they whispered. "Can I hug you?" they asked. I went into my room and closed the door and cried some more. It seemed like every five minutes someone knocked. I was so polite and eager to please that I gave them all hugs and told them I was okay and thank you for coming.

An hour later, my youth pastor showed up to do her pastoral duty. She sat next to me in my darkened, cluttered room. She said, "You can cry." But I heard, "You should be crying." My head was throbbing from hours of crying. I wanted her to go away and I wanted to be alone and not cry. But I cried for her...hoping she'd be satisfied and feel good about herself and go away. My relatives seemed to think I was doing "well" if I wasn't crying. Hmmm, for an eager-to-please girl, it was getting hard to keep track of everyone's agendas for my grief.

My eldest brother showed up. He was twenty-two, getting his master's at Stanford. I was in the backyard, watching a litter of puppies we had. This was the hug I longed for with all my heart. Shouldn't he hug me? Doesn't he understand? But he just sat in a chair nearby and didn't say much. This moment, more than any other in my life, encapsulates the alienation and loneliness I felt in my family. Our father had just died,

and we sat watching those puppies in silence.

I only wish we could rewind the clock and rewrite the script, whispering in Jeannie's brother's ear, "*Go ahead, reach out and hug your sister... just acknowledge her.*" But that would have required him being able to think past his own emotional avalanche.

Paula's husband David was killed on September 11, 2001, in the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York. She hadn't planned on raising three young sons as a single mom.

I don't think of myself as a victim or survivor, per se. David is the victim here. He's the one who was killed...But I do know this is the hardest thing I have had to deal with in life, for sure—a before-and-after moment for my family. One of the things that strikes me looking back is how my neighbors became neighbors. It is not easy to reach out when you feel so needy. In fact, I resisted support at times because I couldn't handle any more people in my home, or all the phone calls. Many of the neighbors on my block I really didn't know so well before 9-11, but their kindness left an indelible impression that will be with me always.

It's funny how I feel a little guilty when I see all the Tupperware in my cupboard—so many casseroles and goodies delivered to comfort me and my boys after the shock of losing David. I think I put on blinders at some point, just to get through, and now I can't recall all the kind gestures from so many. What would Miss Manners say about returning Tupperware and casserole dishes? How can I possibly repay so many, or write

enough thank-you notes to show my gratitude? There's one gorgeous dish, with artistic detailing, someone left behind. I feel a tinge of guilt every time I use it, wondering whose it is. I've decided the best way for me to thank people is to pay their kindness forward to others in pain...to look for opportunities to show empathy and support. Because I've been comforted by the kindness of strangers, I will do the same for others. I hope this ripple effect might help other hurting families who are facing profound loss. And, no, I don't want any of them to write me a thank you or return "my" Tupperware. Who knows? It might be theirs after all.

Sometimes the most powerful gift we give is simple encouragement. After Debra lost her husband to a heart attack, she told me how grateful she was when other people who had been through tough times kept telling her, "You're going to be okay." Debra needed a house full of people, not quiet contemplation.

My daughter and I are blessed with the most loving and caring friends. They never left our side. They brought unconditional love and support to us and our immediate families. They truly did everything and anything for us. During the dark days after my husband's death, my daughter and I would lie on the bed in my room and listen to our friends reminisce about Herb. They filled our home and our hearts with love and laughter. They also filled our home with food, food, food and a full bar!

Just be ready to pick up on the hints people in crisis may give as to what is needed at any particular time. Try to make it about that person and not your own hang-ups or past

traumas. Maybe your friend wants you to come by every day. Maybe it's just once a week. You must assess and reassess the situation. Be open. Be kind. Bring food. Then run the vacuum and wipe down the kitchen counters after putting the leftovers away in the fridge. After her miscarriage, my wife supplied our neighbor Beth with a steady stream of escapist books and funny movies.

When I was in the throes of it, I read an entire bag of Kelly's romance novels. They transported me away from my problems to another place and time, where everything ends happily. They were a fantastic way to get away from it all without leaving my room. I watched *Notting Hill* about ten times. Same deal. It's funny, it's a love story; there are beautiful people and delightful accents, and everyone is happy at the end. It's what my mother the librarian refers to as "brain candy." I think it's the best thing for a heartache.

The harder the situation, the more the family will appreciate your presence and support. You do not need to make lengthy visits—sometimes a few minutes will suffice. But your willingness to go out of your way to say a few words of comfort will never be forgotten.

Studies show that people most often offer advice and words of reassurance as common expressions of sympathy to people going through loss. But, survivors themselves will tell you, advice and assurance are the *least* helpful. Supportive listening is the *most* helpful. Even when people don't want to talk, your job is still to listen. Don't fill the air

with words. Don't pry or ask too many questions. When you are initially at a loss for words, however, here are some appropriate icebreakers.

I'm sorry.

Thank you for letting me know.

How are you doing with all this?

I'm here to support you in whatever you need.

What's the hardest part for you?

I'll call you tomorrow.

How are you coping?

Take the time you need.

Thank you for sharing your feelings.

The etiquette of consoling is about learning to communicate genuine affection and unconditional acceptance. It's never too late to start. Here are several condolence tips drawn from survivor experience:

- **Acknowledge our loss.** Even saying the “wrong” thing sincerely is better than saying nothing at all. Try something like, “I’m not sure what to say, but I’m sorry for what happened, and I really care.” If you feel you’ve said something insensitive, it’s better to acknowledge it outright, “I’m sorry, that was probably the wrong thing to say. I just want to help.”

- **Look for specific ways to offer help.** Well-meaning friends often say, “Please let me know if there’s anything I can do.” Such an invitation puts the burden on us to think of something and then “assign” it. Unlikely. Try instead, “I will call you Tuesday morning to drive you to the appointment.” Then do it.
- **Pitch in.** Handling mundane chores provides welcome relief during stressful times. It allows us to focus on urgent needs and tend to our loved ones, not just things on the task list. If a friend is spending all her time at the hospital with her ailing father, offer to pick the kids up from school, shovel the driveway, walk the dog, or shop for groceries. Every bit helps. But try to give graciously and anonymously, if you can, without waiting for recognition or a special thank you.
- **Talk about the person who died and use their name.** You can do this whether they just passed away or have been gone for years. When friends and relatives avoid all mention of a dead person, it is as if their life has been erased, and this is even more painful than the loss itself.
- **Share your memories.** It is always nice to jot down a memory and give it to the family. You don't have to wait for a holiday to do so. Also, if you think your friend's late husband would have been proud of their daughter's recent music performance or graduation, share that sentiment. Even if you didn't know the person who died, ask about him or her.
- **Remember anniversaries and other significant days.** People often feel especially lonely on the anniversaries of tragic events, and also on holidays where

families reminisce. If you think a particular day might be difficult for a friend or relative, offer to spend time with them on that day or send a card or email to say you are thinking of them and remembering their loved one.

- **Continue to invite us to special occasions.** If we have recently experienced a loss, we may need some encouragement to get out and socialize. At first we may decline, but that doesn't mean we don't appreciate the invitation. Bereavement is painful enough, but no one wants to lose their connection with normal life and friends in the process.¹

Empathy etiquette is about being keenly observant and caring. The general purpose is to make others feel more comfortable. It's not about you. It's about them. Offering help is never wrong, and in most cases, our common sense will guide us. As long as we keep reminding ourselves that no matter what, our friend or the survivor comes first—not the illness, not the crutch, not the doctor, not even the crisis. If you ever have a question—what to do, how to do it, how to say it—the survivor will always be your best resource. You can ask.

The last thing anyone needs is pity. Friedrich Nietzsche put his finger on it, “Pity stands opposed to the tonic emotions which heighten our vitality: it has a depressing effect. We are deprived of strength when we feel pity.”² I couldn't agree more that pity encourages victimhood by sapping a survivor's resilience. Pity implies a person is a bit pathetic and

¹ Joan Rudnicki, "Rules of Grief Etiquette"; <http://www.angelfire.com/co3/cbh/COMFORT.html>

² Nietzsche, Friedrich, *The Antichrist* (New York: Penguin, 1954), Reprinted in Portable Nietzsche 572-573.

lacks the capacity to cope. Sympathy is only mildly better, defined as “a feeling or expression of sorrow for the distress of another; commiseration.”¹ While sympathy may not be as demoralizing as pity, it falls short of helpful. Sympathy is what we find in greeting cards when others hear we are going through something difficult. Knowing someone cares is better than nothing, but sympathy implies some distance, and on its own will not do much to build up and encourage a survivor. What is called for in crisis is compassion and empathy in action. You feel for and with someone in pain; you show you care; you show up, watch your tongue, and offer practical support.

In Job, the oldest book of the Bible, we find the story of a kindly God-fearing gentleman abused by Satan and assaulted verbally by his friends and neighbors. A true survivor, Job will not tolerate pity or abide sympathy from anyone. Instead, he demands truth and justice. In the Book of Job we discover timeless counsel on the do’s and don’ts of approaching people in the midst of their personal plague. Job’s three friends start off well enough when confronted with Job’s massive misfortune. They keep silent. But after only a week, they can’t resist opening their mouths. *What had Job done to deserve this calamity? Maybe he wasn’t as righteous as everyone thought?* Classic blame-the-victim stuff. Ultimately, their judgmental misreading of the situation triggers an angry rebuke from Job:

If you and I were to change places, I could talk like you; how I could harangue you and wag my head at you! But no, I would speak words of encouragement, and then my

¹ *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, 4th Ed.* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000).

condolences would flow in streams. If I speak, my pain is not eased; if I am silent, it does not leave me. Meanwhile, my friend wearies me with false sympathy...¹

God demonstrates tough love with His thunderous voice out of the tempest, but He also shows some good empathy etiquette. To begin with, He waits a *very* long time—thirty-seven chapters—before speaking. Unlike Job’s fair-weather friends, God took time to listen. And when God does speak, He lets these friends know they were not helpful to Job. “*When the Lord had finished speaking to Job, He said to Eliphaz the Temanite, ‘I am angry with you and your two friends, because you have not spoken as you ought about me, as my servant Job has done.’*”²

Job begged for mercy, but he never gave up. He got plenty mad, with grief and unanswered questions, but he didn’t concede hope that, if he could just hear from God, things might get better. And even if they didn’t, Job would at least have had his day in court. After the worst suffering a person can endure—death of family, loss of livelihood, chronic pain and illness, reduced to living on the streets—Job goes on to thrive. “*The Lord blessed the end of Job’s life more than the beginning... He had seven sons and three daughters... He saw his sons and his grandsons to four generations, and died at a very great age.*”¹

In the end, aren’t we all “put in our place” by disaster and death? Life can hurt us terribly, and our deepest questions are never fully answered. We, like Job, will never

¹ Job 16: 4-7.

² Job 42:7.

¹ Job 42. 7-17

know *why* we're allowed to be tortured by fate. But, if we hang on long enough, we will see there is a sequel in survivorship—the opportunity for us to grow stronger and thrive. In sum, when it comes to empathy etiquette, Job's friends would have done well to remember some basic guidelines drawn from survivor experience:

- Don't blame victims or "feel sorry" for them. Respect their strength; empathy requires dignity, not pity.
- Don't try to fix or rescue people. Offer support instead of advice.
- Don't talk too much. Listen and try open-ended questions.
- Don't pretend things are the same. Acknowledge the situation.
- When you visit, make yourself helpful.

On our trip to Bosnia in 1997, shortly before her death, Princess Diana would insist the most important thing was "caring enough to show up" and always remembering to say "thank you" any time someone has welcomed you in their home or shared a piece of their lives. Two weeks later, I honored her by attending her funeral and simply telling her two sons how much she loved them and talked about them nonstop during that last summer. "I know, she told me all about her trip," Prince William said quietly as his blue eyes glanced downward, a mirror image of his mother. "Thank you," he added, "My mother loved people." I didn't try to say anything else, just a nod.

It was Princess Diana, after my own mother, who taught me the most about holding

steady, with dignity, in the presence of another's suffering. Diana had the gift. And she was able to develop her skills over the years, during visit after visit to hospitals, hospices and homeless shelters. Yes, it takes practice.

By listening to others pour out their grief (while minding our manners), we are able to nudge people who are suffering onto their path of survivorship. That's all we can do for them. Whether or not they go on to thrive? Well, that's up to them, isn't it?

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I WILL NOT BE BROKEN

5 Steps to Overcoming a Life Crisis

JERRY WHITE

“In *I Will Not Be Broken*, Jerry White brings his insight and experience to bear expertly for those facing life's unexpected challenges. He embodies the spirit of survivorship.”

—Lance Armstrong

“[White’s] courageous personal experience is a beacon for all who are searching to recover and reclaim life.”

—Her Majesty Queen Noor of Jordan, bestselling author of *Leap of Faith*

“An excellent guide to navigating and overcoming the traumas we face in our lives.”

—Deepak Chopra, author of *Buddha: A Story of Enlightenment*

“Offers wise, practical, and inspiring steps to come back from life’s worst setbacks.”

—Daniel Goleman, author of *Social Intelligence*

From a co-recipient of the **Nobel Prize for Peace** and founder of [Survivor Corps](#) comes an astoundingly effective guide to recreating a happy and fulfilling life after catastrophe strikes—a book that Bob and Lee Woodruff call “a road map for the individual and their family to re-enter the land of the living.” In **I WILL NOT BE BROKEN**, Jerry White reframes the question “why do bad things happen to good people?” and asks, *given that bad things do happen, how do people absorb the blows and move through them?*

Tragedy happens to everyone. Whether it’s the loss of a loved one, a painful divorce, or a serious injury, we all face unavoidable moments that divide our lives into “before” and “after.” These events take a heavy toll on everyone, but there are those who have muscled their way through tough times and emerged stronger, wiser—even grateful for their struggle. Jerry White is one such example. In 1984,

he lost his leg—and almost his life—in a tragic accident, and has personally endured the pain of loss and the challenge of rebuilding.

As cofounder of Survivor Corps, White has connected with thousands of victims of tragedy, and in **I WILL NOT BE BROKEN**, he shares their collective wisdom, which he distills into an effective five-step program for turning tragedy into triumph:

- **Face facts**
- **Choose life**
- **Reach out**
- **Get moving**
- **Give back**

In their own words, his fellow survivors share their stories—a group that includes the well known like Lance Armstrong, Elie Wiesel, and the late Princess Diana, but also everyday people including soldiers and veterans of the military. With compassion, White takes readers through the process of not only enduring tragedy and victimhood, but going on to thrive.

#

JERRY WHITE is a global survivor activist who has dedicated his life to helping victims of violent conflict. While camping in Northern Israel in 1984, he stepped on a landmine, and he spent nearly six months in Israeli hospitals learning to walk on an artificial leg. Since then, he has become a recognized leader of the historic International Campaign to Ban Landmines, co-recipient of the 1997 Nobel Prize for Peace; and a cofounder of Survivor Corps. He has testified before the US Congress and the United Nations and appeared in hundreds of media interviews and profiles.

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| <p>I WILL NOT BE BROKEN: 5 Steps to Overcoming a Life Crisis By Jerry White May 1, 2008 \$22.95 0-312-36895-X</p> |
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Jerry White is a recognized leader of the historic International Campaign to Ban Landmines, co-recipient of the Nobel Prize for Peace; as well as co-founder of [Survivor Corps](#). Jerry White lives in Maryland and Malta with his wife Kelly and four kids.

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For more information about *I Will Not Be Broken*, visit: iwillnotbeproken.smnr.us

For more information about Survivor Corps, visit: survivorcorps.smnr.us

To purchase this book click [here](#)



About Survivor Corps

Around the globe, people are inflicting harm on one another on an alarming scale with alarming ease. There were approximately 250 wars throughout the 20th century. Today, there are more than 39 conflicts raging in the world –from armed conflicts in Latin America to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to genocide in Darfur.

More than 35 million people have been displaced from these conflicts—innocent people who have been robbed of their dignity, their homes and their livelihoods. With no hope or tools to rise above their circumstances, far too many victims lash out, seeking revenge for their plight and perpetuating the cycle of violence and suffering. Something has to be done to break this downward spiral.

Survivor Corps operates under the credo that no one is better equipped to change the world than those who have been most scarred by what’s wrong with it. There is a way to break the cycle of violence, and it begins with showing survivors a new, more hopeful way forward.

What is the Survivor Corps philosophy? No one is better equipped to change the world than those most scarred by what’s wrong with it.

Whom does Survivor Corps serve? We serve people who have been injured by global conflict, primarily through training and support of the organizations that serve conflict survivors at the local level.

Where does Survivor Corps work? Wherever communities are experiencing or recovering from conflict – currently in over 50 countries.

Why should I support Survivor Corps? Survivor Corps (formerly Landmine Survivors Network) has a ten-year track record of results, improving health, creating economic opportunity, and changing laws & policies for survivors of conflict.

How does Survivor Corp work? We work across the spectrum of issues and organizations that affect the lives of survivors.

Can Survivor Corps really solve this problem? Yes. We believe that by showing survivors a new, more hopeful way forward, we can help break the cycle of violence.

Survivor Corps provides the tools and support survivors need to rise above their injuries and give back to their communities. Learn more at www.survivorcorps.org.