Helping a Loved One

What to Say and Do

When the people we care about become ill with a psychological disorder, it can be challenging to figure out the best way to respond to their situation. Every person is different, and every illness can manifest in different ways. Although there is no single “right way” to treat every person, these general guidelines might offer you some insight.

Tell them you love them and how much they mean to you. This may seem obvious, but it can’t be stressed enough. People with mental illnesses often suffer from extremely low self-worth and the belief that they are nothing but a burden to those around them. Tell your family members or friends how much you care about them, how much value they bring to your relationship, and that you will continue to love them no matter how bad things get. This is vital—even if they tell you that they don’t believe you. In the end, you can’t really tell people you love them too often.

Tell your family members or friends with mental illness that you will be there for them through thick and thin, and then do it. Spend time with your loved ones. Listen to them. Offer to go with them to appointments. Go for a walk with them. Take their calls late at night. Order take-out and watch movies with them all day. Offer to help them with household chores. Read to them. Bring them a meal. Call them every day. Visit them in the hospital. Offer to do online research about treatments or supportive services. Spend quiet time with them doing absolutely nothing. Do give them space, but don’t pull away completely, even if they sometimes tell you it’s what they want. Work with those who are ill to find a balance between pushing them enough to fight isolation, but not so much that it exacerbates their depression and anxiety.

Offer to help them find and engage with effective treatment. The health care system can be maddening on the best of days. Trying to find and fight for effective care when you are ill can feel impossible. Offer to help your friends or family members research the best providers in your area, figure out their health insurance coverage and research the best available treatments. Offer to pick up their drugs at the pharmacy, remind them to take their meds or help them do homework assignments that their psychotherapist recommended. Other examples of practical support include help with keeping a schedule and remembering appointments, and even sorting through the mail. When it comes to this kind of help, however, always ask for permission.

Don’t tell your loved ones that you know how they feel. You don’t. Even if you suffer from the same psychological disorder, you don’t really know exactly how they feel. Some people appreciate hearing how you’ve gone through something difficult and then came out the other side. Most people need to hear that they won’t always feel ill and distressed, but be careful not to imply that

their illness and recovery will be exactly the same as yours.

Ask your loved ones how they would like you to treat them. People like to feel in control. This is even more critical when a person is dealing with a psychological disorder and the world feels completely out of control. Rather than make assumptions about how your loved ones want to be treated, ask them. Your loved ones might respond that they don't know how they want to be treated. What they want and need can also change from week to week, especially as they get better, but they will usually appreciate being asked. Asking them about their preference gives them more control in your relationship with them.

Ask your loved ones whom they want to know about their illness and how much you should say. Don't make assumptions in this regard. Talking about other people's mental illness without permission can cause hard feelings and put a serious dent in their trust in you. Sometimes others will need to know. Inform your loved ones in advance that you will need to disclose their illness in case of a crisis or if you need help with their care or require psychological and emotional support for yourself. If your loved ones are a danger to themselves or others, you should always seek help, regardless of any previous agreements you made with them.

Don't constantly ask, "How are you feeling?" It's not that you should never ask this. You do want to know about their mood, especially so you can give them an outside perspective on their progress. Are they getting worse or better? Incessantly asking about their mood, however, encourages them to constantly focus on their illness and how badly they feel. You can ask other kinds of questions, such as:

- What did you do today?
- Where did you go today?
- What are you thinking about?
- How are you doing with [an activity that is part of their treatment plan]?

Offer to run interference in social situations. Dealing with social settings can be particularly overwhelming and painful for people suffering from depression and anxiety disorders. This is because it can be difficult to know how to handle situations that become overwhelming. Offer to accompany your loved ones to social situations. Prearrange a signal they can give you in case they want help "escaping" a difficult situation.

Be honest, but try to frame things in a positive way. People you love need to know you will tell them the truth. This can be especially true if your friends or family members are suffering from a psychological disorder, in which case issues of trust in relationships can powerfully influence their recovery. While you should be honest with your loved ones, and not withhold important information, do think carefully about what you say and how you say it.

If your father is the one who is ill, for instance, and you're taking on a lot of his care and responsibilities, he might say something like, "I'm a horrible burden to you. You must resent me

terribly.”

This is not the time to mention how the whole situation overwhelms and annoys you, but do say something like, “You know what Dad, it’s hard to see you suffer. Yes, I am doing more right now, and sometimes that makes me tired, but I love you and I know you’d do the same for me.”

Family and couples therapy is often helpful for exactly these kinds of situations and conversations. It can provide a safe place for the participants to be honest with each other about their wants and needs. Plus, as an added bonus everyone in the therapy group can learn more constructive communication strategies.

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