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**How to support someone going through a mentally tough time**

By The Washington Post

Adapted by Newsela Staff

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Have you ever found yourself wanting to support friends and family who are experiencing mental health challenges, like anxiety or depression, but didn't know where to begin or what to say? Here are some "do's" and "don'ts" from mental health experts on how to help.

**Do: Offer A Safe Space To Talk And Listen**

"The first step is providing the space and the invitation for the person to explore what's going on," said Mark Aoyagi, the co-director of sports and performance psychology at the University of Denver.

If the person takes you up on your invitation, ask them how they are doing. According to Aoyagi, you don't have to shy away from possibly sensitive subjects because it may be the first time someone has ever raised them. It can be helpful for someone to have a trusted person they can communicate with.

It's also important to figure out where a person is in their decision-making process about how to handle their mental health issue, said Theresa Nguyen, a licensed clinical social worker and the chief program officer of Mental Health America. This information can then guide how you provide support. If, for instance, a person is still trying to make sense of what their next step is, you may be able to help them think it through.

But above all, experts said, you need to prioritize listening. "When we're in moments of suffering, what we want is empathy and listening," Nguyen said.

**Don't: Be Pushy About Talking Or Dispensing Advice**

Many people want to immediately fix what's wrong, but always fight that urge, experts say.

The more you're able to listen and the less you provide advice, unless you're expressly asked to provide advice, the better, said Lynn Bufka, a senior director at the American Psychological Association. "You want to have the opportunity for the person to tell you what's going on in the most non-judgmental way possible."

If the person asks you for space, respect their wishes, said Akua K. Boateng, a licensed psychotherapist in Philadelphia. Even though you may be reaching out with good intent to offer support, she said, "if they're not asking for that, that's not helpful."

**Do: Validate And Affirm Decisions**

When someone is going through a tough time, it helps to know that others understand and accept their struggle. Acknowledge and validate their feelings, and if they have made a decision about their next move — to take a step back from a challenging situation, for example — you should affirm that choice.

"Sometimes people feel alone in making strong decisions," Boateng said. To counter that, she suggested stressing that you're going to be there for that person to listen and to support them.

If someone has made up their mind, try to avoid asking questions such as, "Are you sure?" Nguyen said, which can put people in a position of defensiveness.

Instead of questioning someone's decision, she and other experts recommended shifting your focus to how you can help the person navigate next steps.

**Do: Ask How You Can Support Them**

Keep in mind that people's needs are different. While one person may want support and affirmation that they made the right decision, that approach may not be helpful for someone else, Boateng said.

It's important to ask someone how you can be most helpful to them, experts said, which will then help you know the right things to say and do. Try to be positive without "bypassing or overlooking the pain and suffering" someone is experiencing, Boateng said.

**Don't: Engage In Toxic Positivity**

Oftentimes not knowing what to say can turn into being overly positive, which may do more harm than good. "Toxic positivity," or the tendency to cope with a bad situation by putting a positive spin on it and ignoring the negative, can be "disguised as genuine support," Boateng said. People think they're saying the best thing, but they are not.

Toxic positivity includes phrases such as "push through," "everything is going to be fine" or "there's always next time."

"You almost assuredly have not walked in that person's shoes and experienced the things that that person has," Bufka said. "So trying to tell the person, 'Oh, it's going to be OK,' while well-meaning, often feels devaluing of what the person's struggle is."

Additionally, toxic positivity may encourage a person to stay in a situation that isn't healthy for them, Nguyen said. "You're using positive words, but you're still pushing someone to do something they don't want to do."

**Do: Respect Privacy**

Be sure to ask that person how much information about their situation they would feel comfortable with you sharing, Bufka said. If you don't have permission, "it's best to assume you shouldn't be sharing anything private about other people's lives," Nguyen noted.

But if you are asked, it's important to be honest without specific information, Bufka said. Some possible responses include, "It was a very personal/difficult decision/situation," or "They could use support right now," she said.

**Do: Offer To Help**

You can help someone establish their own perspective on the situation they are in, and you can encourage them to give themselves permission to make a change, Aoyagi said.

Experts recommend offering help beyond emotional support, similar to how you would support someone who is grieving. Ask if you can provide meals or run errands, or simply be a physical presence in the person's life by scheduling walks or going over to spend time with them.

If someone decides they want professional support, Bufka recommended helping to get them connected.

**Don't: Take On More Than You Can Handle Yourself**

"We don't have to be perfect in our answers," Boateng said, and just doing your best sometimes may not be the support that they need. "That's why it really takes a community, not just one person."

As you're providing support, it's important to realize your own limits and know when it might be time to involve a mental health professional, Bufka said.

A family member or friend, she said, should "be a willing companion on the journey as opposed to the person leading the journey."

**Questions:**

* **There are five “dos” discussed in this article. Name all of them and then select one of those “dos” and explain it.**
* **What is “toxic positivity”?**
* **Explain the following statement: “A family member or friend should be a willing companion on the journey as opposed to the person leading the journey."**
* **Why is this an important topic for us to learn about?**