



6 WAYS YOU CAN *help a loved one* ON THEIR HEALING JOURNEY

By Shainna Ali | NAMI.org

TAKE A MOMENT TO CONSIDER ALL THE PEOPLE IN YOUR LIFE: your coworkers, friends, family. At any given time, 1 in 5 of these individuals is living with a mental health condition. You may have noticed them struggling, but if you're not a trained mental health professional, you may not have known how to help.

However, you can help. You can be supportive and encouraging during their mental health journey. Here are a few tips on supporting the mental health of those you love.

1. EDUCATE YOURSELF.

There are hundreds of mental health concerns; your job is not to become an expert in all of them. When you do notice potentially troublesome symptoms, it's helpful to determine if those signs may indicate a mental illness. Familiarizing yourself with common symptoms can help you understand and convey your worries. You may also benefit from taking a course or joining a support group of individuals who can relate to the hardships you and your loved one may be facing.

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**COUNSELOR
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Q: I think my friend is depressed, but they're not getting help for it. Is there anything I can do?

A: Let your friend know you are there for them. You can start the conversation by sharing your concerns and asking specific questions. For instance, you might say, "It seems you've been having a hard time lately. How are you feeling?" Keep in mind you don't have to try to "fix" your friend or family member or their problems; it can really help to just be a good listener.

Engage with your friend by using active listening techniques, such

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2. REMAIN CALM.

Recognizing that a loved one might need help can be daunting but try to remain calm – impulsively approaching the individual might make you seem insensitive or aggressive. Try to be mindful and patient. Take time to consider your loved one's symptoms and your relationship before acting. Writing down how you feel and what you want to say may be useful to help you recognize and understand your thoughts and feelings, and help you slow down while connecting to your good intentions.

3. BE RESPECTFUL AND PATIENT.

Before talking to someone about their mental health, reflect on your intention to promote healing and keep that in mind. Ask how you can help in their recovery process and be cautious not to come off as controlling. While encouraging a person to seek help is OK, it is not appropriate to demand it of them. Let them know that if they ever wish to talk in the future, you're available.

4. LISTEN.

Give your loved one the gift of having someone who cares about their unique experience. Don't bypass their narrative by making connections to others' experiences. You might recognize a connection to your own experience, however, sharing your story prematurely may undermine their experience. You may be prepared with hotlines, books, or a list of community providers, and although these are excellent sources of support, it's important to take time to thoroughly listen before giving advice. It's a privilege to have someone share intimate details of their mental health. Be present and listen before moving forward.



5. PROVIDE SUPPORT.

One of the best ways to help is to simply ask how. It's not helpful to try to be someone's therapist, but you can still help. People don't like being told what to do – asking how you can help empowers them to take charge of their recovery, while also letting them know you are a source of support.

6. ESTABLISH BOUNDARIES.

As you support your struggling loved one, it's important to consider both your boundaries and theirs. When trying to help, you are susceptible to neglecting yourself in the process; boundaries will help you maintain your self-care, while also empowering your loved one. Be sure you're not working harder than they are at their own healing process.

As a caring person, you may grapple between wanting to encourage and support your loved one while wanting to honor their process and independence. Unfortunately, there are no foolproof guidelines for helping your loved one on their journey towards recovery. However, you can connect to your intentions, convey compassion and maintain your own self-care while empowering your loved one regardless of where they are in their healing journey.

Information reprinted from National Alliance on Mental Illness. Visit NAMI.org/blogs for more information.

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as clarifying what they say and asking questions to get more information instead of assuming you understand what they mean. Validate their feelings by saying something like, "That sounds really difficult. I'm sorry to hear that." It can help to show empathy and interest in your voice tone and body language. Your friend may not open up or want to talk the first time you ask, so it can help to continue telling them you are there.

Help them in other ways when possible – even small tasks can be very difficult for someone with depression to manage at times. Offer to help with household tasks or chores, but only do what you know is within your means, so you don't get burned out.

It might also help to educate yourself more about what they are going through. Talk to your friend about their specific symptoms or how they're feeling, but avoid asking them to tell you about depression itself. Read up on the symptoms, causes, diagnostic criteria, and treatments on your own. Though people experience depression differently, being aware of the general symptoms and vocabulary can help you have more in-depth discussions with your friend.

You can encourage your friend to get help, keeping in mind that you cannot control their involvement or personal choices. If they are resistant to reaching out, it may help to offer your assistance in helping them find a therapist. Remind them that their employer may offer an employee assistance program, like The Village EAP. Encourage a general check-up with their primary care physician, who they might be more open to. Suggest your loved one make a list of symptoms to discuss with their doctor, and even offer to go with them for support if you can.

Remember to also take care of yourself. When you care about someone who is living with depression, it's tempting to drop everything to support them. It's not wrong to want to help a friend, but it's also important to take care of your own needs, too. Practice self-care, honest communication, set appropriate boundaries, and seek support when needed, leading by example.

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