

Helping With Difficult Emotions

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When someone you love is facing a big challenge, you naturally want to help. Unfortunately, it is not always clear how to help. When it is something practical or physical, you might feel relief at knowing exactly how to contribute. When it is something emotionally complex, it's not as easy to know how to offer support.

To complicate matters further, often your loved one doesn't know what to ask for or what would be helpful. If there is reactivity in the mix, you are aware of not wanting to escalate it, but, at the same time, you know you want to help.

There is no simple answer or rule, but there are some simple things to consider as you engage. First, remind yourself that when you offer something you can ask, "Is this helpful?" Making your intention explicit and getting feedback supports collaboration rather than polarizing your roles as "helper" and "helpee."

You can also observe. Specifically, notice if the other person visibly relaxes or contracts. It's helpful to remember that relaxing and contracting don't necessarily correlate with more or less emotion. Someone might visibly relax as more emotion pours forth or might contract as reactive emotions escalate. When you are relaxed and expansive, you allow space for emotion to move and be met skillfully.

In general, engaging in talk about what should or shouldn't be, or entertaining what-ifs in frightening scenarios tends towards not contributing. Reviewing past action isn't helpful either when it is done with shame or anger.

Perhaps the most concrete thing you can do is offer a menu of possible ways you would be willing to contribute. Often a person in distress can't articulate what they need but can recognize it when they hear it. A menu of possible ways to support a loved one in emotional distress might include:

- **Empathy:** Would you like some empathy?
- **Reflective listening:** Would you like to talk about it and have me reflect back what I'm hearing?
- **Perspective:** Would it be helpful to hear how I frame the situation?
- **Reminders about present resources:** Would a reminder about who loves and cares for you be helpful?
- **Shared humanity:** Would hearing about how others have coped with that situation be useful?
- **Play:** Would doing something fun together be helpful?
- **Information:** Would you like me to share what I know about the situation?
- **Companionship:** Would you like me to go with you? (*to a challenging situation*)
- **Touch/affection:** Would a hug help?
- **Reassurance:** Would you like reassurance that I'm not judging you?
- **Grounding/regulation:** Would you like to go for a run together?

While you likely wouldn't offer all of these at once, even naming two or three options is helpful. It can provide a starting place. It's also important to note that some of these menu items don't directly involve the difficult situation. It's important for you to stay clear about the difference between your need to contribute and other needs of your own, like inclusion, clarity, and information.

You likely recognize these things on the menu and may have offered all at some point. The main thing here is that you are able to move fluidly among them in response to what's truly helpful, rather than offer something out of habit or based on what you think the other person should have.

Perhaps the most important thing to remember in your desire to help is that your friendly, kind presence is often the biggest gift. Talking about what's happening with someone can give you the sense that you're involved and helping, but it's typically less helpful than your consistent and kind presence.

Practice

Look through the above list of ways to help and notice which ones you offer most often. Is there one or two you would like to include more often in your offers to help? Set your intention to offer one of those next time.