

How to Be Friends with Someone Who's Depressed

In our overly connected society, we may often confuse connectivity with connection — human connection that is. Commenting, texting, reposting and retweeting have become substitutes for communication, and we often erroneously use these to gauge the status of a relationship. That can be dangerous, because the truth is so much gets overlooked when scrolling through our feeds. Sometimes it's either way too apparent that a friend has depression or anxiety and we are quick to catalogue them as “dark.” Other times, our friends become experts at curating their lives to showcase a surreal perfection, and it can be way too easy for us to believe they are alright.

So, you notice your friend is feeling the blues, the reds and every color in between. What can you do if you suspect a close friend may be experiencing symptoms of depression or anxiety?

What Not to Say

Disclaimer: I am no expert! I can only speak from experience and cannot possibly put into words how painful each of the following statements can be:

1. **“You’re being negative”** and the equally frustrating **“Think positive.”** Most people with depression know they are being negative, they know it because they feel negativity in the soreness of their muscles every single day. And by definition, people who have anxiety think only in terms of negative outcomes. So, while these statements are true and would seem helpful, they only serve to salt an open wound. It’s a reminder of just how broken they feel.
2. **“What you need to do is get out more.”** Again, there is so much truth to this simple statement. The problem is that when you’re inclined to visualize catastrophic endings as if they were prophecies, the prospect of “getting out there” is terrifying.
3. **“But you have everything.”** Material possessions, apparent success, intelligence, beauty... none of these account for having a real mental illness. Reminding someone of everything they have will only sound like you are accusing them of being ungrateful, which leads to shame and guilt; a combination which yields unfavorable results.
4. **“Mind over matter.”** First of all, it’s too cliché to ever say this aloud, so stop it. Secondly, this phrase derives from the premise that the mind in question is working properly. In the case of someone who has anxiety or depression, the mind is the very thing causing the physical pain, lethargy, panic attacks, etc. Until they’ve learned to outthink their own thoughts, there is no way they can apply this advice.
5. **“That’s just your depression talking.”** Have you ever accused a woman of being angry because she might be on her period? If you’re wrong, it’s insulting; if you’re right it’s insensitive. Regardless, it’s never received well. It’s true people who have depression and anxiety can misconstrue, misquote and exaggerate. Oftentimes, their arguments are completely one-sided; it’s part of the problem. That doesn’t make their pain any less palpable, their anger any less valid, or their sadness any less real.

What *Can* You Do

It may often feel like navigating a minefield, but there is plenty you *can* do which will be appreciated (most of the time).

1. Recognize their symptoms. We can often see changes in people before they become aware of it themselves. Once the pang of being blown off wears off, start keeping tabs on your friend. When they seek professional help you can compare notes.

2. Do not criticize their decision to accept or refuse treatment. Recognize that every person owns their body and the right pursue a course of therapy or treatment that is different from what you would choose.

3. Switch it up. You may be used to staying out late and drinking with your friend, but her needs may have changed. Think of relaxing activities that do not include caffeine or alcohol; these can be harmful to those who have anxiety and depression. Invite them to exercise with you. Real talk, they may decline every single time; but, one day, they may say yes and it will mean everything in the world you invited them.

4. Reach out IRL. Don't think that replying to a text with three heart emoji is offering help. Insist. True, the person will be rude, negative and may even offend you. Try to forgive them and give them credit for all the times they were better. I always appreciate when friends leave voice notes if I reject their calls. They don't know I replay them over and over when I need to hear them.

5. Cut them some slack. They know how much of a drag they can be. They realize they make snappy comments they can never take back. They are in physical pain or fear every day of their lives. They are fully aware of how rude and neglectful they can be. Still, there is no guilt trip you can give them they haven't already given themselves. So, just cut them some slack.

It's so illogical that in our overly connected society we so often confuse connectivity with connection. Resist the tendency to disconnect from someone you suspect is feeling blue. Rather, fight to stay connected through any and every means necessary. Know that the extent of their recovery will greatly depend on each of these connections.

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