

What to Say and What Not to Say to Someone With a Mental Health Challenge

If a friend or loved one is experiencing mental health challenges, you may be unsure of what to say when they confide in you. See the guidelines below for what to avoid and suggested responses for someone dealing with a mental health challenge, such as anxiety or depression.

Don't say...

"I know what you mean. I had a panic attack when I saw my electrical bill!"

There's a difference between rational anxiety about living expenses and having a real panic attack. Rather than compare your anxiety to theirs, try to keep the conversation focused on them.

"Have you tried yoga or meditation?"

While these and other wellness activities are helpful for some, remember that they may not help everyone. Mental health conditions can be all-consuming, and these strategies are not always enough to help someone feel better.

"Why aren't you seeing a therapist? Why aren't you on medication?"

While it's fine to show concern for a friend, remarks like this can come across as accusatory. Your suggestion that they try medication or see a therapist may not actually help them come to that decision, which is ultimately theirs to make.

"Are you OK?!"

This question can make your loved one feel pressured to get better immediately, which is rarely the case for mental health. They may also feel like they have to tell you they're fine, even if that is not true.

"There are lots of people who have it much worse than you."

Remarks like this encourage the person to compare themselves to others. You should encourage them to stop comparing themselves to others and instead focus on what's best for them.

Instead try...

"Do you want to talk about it? I'm always here for you."

Even if you don't completely understand what your friend is going through, you can still be there for them in a healthy, supportive way. Listen to them without judgment and make sure they know they're not alone.

"What can I do to help?"

If your loved one has had depression or anxiety for a while, they probably know what does and doesn't help them. Even if they just need help with something simple, offering help lets them know you care.

"That sounds really difficult. How are you coping?"

Acknowledging how they feel is both validating and comforting. It reminds your friend that you are listening to them, that you believe that what they're going through is real, and that you want to help them cope.

"Let's go somewhere quieter or take a walk."

In times of extreme anxiety, it can help to try a grounding activity, like going for a walk or finding a peaceful place to talk. Other grounding activities include listening to music or enjoying a favorite scent.

"I'm really sorry you're going through this. I'm here for you if you need me."

Instead of offering an unhelpful comparison, remind them that their feelings are valid and that you want to support them.

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Don't say...

"You wouldn't feel this way if..."

Mental health issues and their causes are complex, and many people wear themselves out emotionally by searching for the causes of their suffering. Placing blame leads to unnecessary distress and takes time from increasing understanding of what is going on.

"You're just looking for attention."

This dismisses their feelings and implies their pain isn't real. It can make them feel ashamed or discourage them from reaching out again for help.

"You have to push through it. It's all in your head."

Mental health challenges are not a matter of willpower, and they often involve biological, emotional, and psychological factors. This statement suggests it's not serious or real, which can be deeply invalidating.

"You just need to think more positively."

While mindset can help in some cases, this oversimplifies complex mental health challenges. It can make the person feel like they're failing just because they can't "positive-think" their way out of it.

"You'll be fine. Don't worry so much."

While this might be meant to comfort, it can feel dismissive. Anxiety and other mental health challenges aren't simply about worrying too much—they're often intense, persistent, and beyond a person's control.

Instead try...

"Are you looking for my perspective or would you rather I listen?"

Clarify which type of support they would like. Listening requires full attention. Let them know that you will not judge them. If they want your insights, it's helpful to begin with something like "I don't know if this applies, but I'm wondering about..."

"Reaching out shows a lot of strength."

Seeking help is a big step in managing mental health. This phrase validates their efforts and encourages them to continue their journey toward healing, reinforcing that asking for help is a strength, not a weakness.

"Would it help if I just sat with you for a while?"

This gives them the opportunity to open up on their own terms. It lets them know that you're willing to support without pushing, which can help them feel more comfortable sharing their experience when they're ready.

"It's okay to not be okay."

This helps normalize the person's feelings and reduces the pressure to always seem fine. It encourages self-compassion and acknowledges that it's acceptable to feel vulnerable.

"What you're going through is real, and I'm here to support you."

Validating feelings builds trust and encourages the person to feel safe sharing their experience with you.