



Being *There*

WHEN SOMEONE WE LOVE OR CARE ABOUT is struggling, going through a hard time, or grieving in some way, wanting to help and comfort them is a natural response. What isn't always natural, however, is knowing what it means to truly be there for someone. We think we know how to offer support, but some of us may wonder, *"Do I really?"*

Our intentions are in the right place but supporting someone is sometimes more difficult to navigate than expected, especially when the person is dealing with something that we haven't personally experienced. Before rushing in to help, consider the following to better understand how to be a more compassionate, respectful source of support for the people you care about.

VALIDATE EMOTIONS AND OFFER REASSURANCE. While you may not be able to understand what someone is going through, listening and empathy go a long way. As the person speaks, give them your undivided attention and truly listen to what they say. Then, validate their feelings with simple, yet compassionate responses, such as, “I’m sorry that you’re having to go through this,” “You’re dealing with a lot,” “I would be furious about that, too,” or “I can’t imagine what this must feel like.”

AVOID GIVING ADVICE. If you’ve gone through something similar or have a strong opinion about your loved one’s situation, you may be tempted to jump in and tell them what you think they should do. The problem is that no matter how similar the experience, you can never fully understand the entirety of someone else’s circumstances. Your two cents – no matter how helpful – could come off as an attack or judgmental. And, if they take your advice and things don’t turn out well, you’ll both pay the price.

OFFER TANGIBLE FORMS OF SUPPORT. It can be hard for someone who’s struggling to tell you what they need, and they may not even know what that is right away. Instead of asking them what they need or how you can help, offer to do something specific or suggest a variety of tasks for them to consider. For example, you might offer to cook dinner, grocery shop, tidy up, drive them to an appointment, or watch the kids for an afternoon. It’s also possible that the only thing the person needs is for you to periodically check in on them or come by for a visit occasionally, so just ask. If this is the case, don’t overstep or be too pushy with offers to do more.

HAVE PATIENCE. Everyone responds to tough times in their own way. What is helpful for one person might not be for another, and the type of support needed may also vary by circumstance. Be patient with the person and with yourself. Try not to personalize things if your efforts are unsuccessful or you don’t get the response you expect. Remember that working through difficulties takes time and it could be that the person simply isn’t ready to talk or accept help just yet.

BE A FAITHFUL FRIEND. If you believe that the person who’s struggling is also dealing with loneliness and social isolation, it can have a compounded effect on their well-being and can even be dangerous. This person needs your support now more than ever, so don’t abandon them no matter how much it may seem like they don’t want your help. Friendship can have a huge impact on our mental health, and you can still be a good friend even at a distance. Call or text regularly to check in with the person, send a note in the mail, or schedule a video chat. Sometimes, reaching out regularly with small gestures that let the person know you care is enough.

For more on how to provide support to your family and friends when they need you the most, contact the EAP for expert guidance and helpful resources. The Employee Assistance Program is a voluntary and confidential employee benefit available to federal employees at no cost.