



Helping friends with stress

Stress is a normal response to the ups and downs of life, and in many cases it can help you manage challenges. However, too much stress can be debilitating, leading to anxiety and depression. When you see a friend struggling to cope with stress, it's sometimes difficult to know what to do.

What to say

When you are talking to a friend and you begin to hear about tough things that are happening, here's how you can offer comfort:

- Ask "How can I help?" — and mean it
- Confirm fear, anxiety, sorrow by saying, "I am so sorry you are going through this"
- "Let me be here for you; you are not alone"
- Be willing to listen and not judge
- Be willing to sit quietly if the person doesn't want to talk
- If touch is warranted, offer a hug
- Suggest a walk, sitting outside in a garden, sharing a cup of coffee in public to combat isolation
- Suggest a known source of pleasure—for example music or writing

How to help

Here are some concrete ways you can help counter anxiety in a distressed friend:

Help them reconnect with the present

When someone you love is in the throes of anxiety, your first instinct might be to urge them to "calm down" or to "just relax." But this may not be possible, because anxiety has a physical component and you can't always "think" your way out of it. Anxiety, or panic attacks, can make us sweat, have dry mouth, get cold feet and tingling fingers. These sensations are real, so don't discount them. Instead, help your loved one reconnect with the present moment. You can do this by asking them to close their eyes and notice their body or what's going on around them: the feeling of their feet touching the ground, the weight of their hands in their lap, the quiet hum of an air conditioner or heater.

Get them moving

Next, help them begin to calm down their body. Encourage them to take a deep breath, which reduces anxiety—ask them to take five to 10 deep breaths. Offer them a drink of water, which eases an upset stomach and dry mouth. Then, take a relaxing walk. Anxiety can cause people to want to run away, and walking forward is the exact opposite. Moving toward something shows you have nothing to fear.

Help them get perspective

When anxious thoughts are rattling around in our minds, it's easy to get lost or overwhelmed. Simply naming our worries can bring some much-needed clarity. Ask your loved one to clearly verbalize what they fear. When they get those thoughts out of their head and into the light, they become less scary—and less believable.

Ask "then what?"

Once you understand their fears, walk them through worst-case scenarios. Maybe your spouse is worried about a stressful meeting with a boss. Ask, "And then what?" They might be afraid of being criticized. "And then what?" They may be afraid of getting fired, losing their income, and ending up on the street. Walking them through these steps illustrates how remote our worst fears often are. Verbalizing worst-case scenario fears helps to neutralize them.

Bring positivity into the balance

It's human nature to spend more time and energy on the negative events in our life than we do the positive—but this keeps us stuck in survival mode. In order to truly thrive, we have to mindfully bring more positivity into our lives. So, once your loved one has found a place of calm, help them shift their thinking to the positive. Have them list three things they are grateful for—and write them down. To help prevent future anxiety, encourage your loved one to make it a habit—beyond reducing stress, the scientifically-proven benefits of this practice range from better sleep to improved self-esteem.

Help is available. For additional information, visit MagellanHealth.com/MYMH

Source: Huffington Post, Psychology Today

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