

## **Befriending someone experiencing mental ill health - tips from Good Neighbours Coventry**

### **How to help a person experiencing depression - as a befriender**

#### **1. Listen to them**

Let your friend know you're there for them. You can start the conversation by sharing your concerns and asking a specific question. You might say, "It seems like you've been having a hard time lately. What's on your mind?". Keep in mind that your friend may want to talk about what they feel, but they might not want advice.

Engage with your friend by using active listening techniques. Ask questions to get more information instead of assuming you understand what they mean. Validate their feelings e.g. "That sounds really difficult. I'm sorry to hear that." Show empathy and interest with your body language. Your friend may not feel like talking the first time you ask, but keep asking open questions (without being pushy) and expressing your concern.

Comparing their feelings to someone else's troubles or saying things like, "But things could be so much worse," generally doesn't help.

#### **2. Encourage them (rather than advising them)**

If your friend is having mental health treatment but says something like, "I think I'm going to cancel my appointment," encourage them to stick with going. The same goes for medication. Encourage positive change by inviting them on a walk or doing an activity together.

Don't take their mood personally. You can encourage positivity (though your friend may not respond) by reminding them of things you like about them — especially when it seems like they only have negative things to say. Positive support can let your friend know they matter to you.

#### **3. Take care of yourself**

If you put all your energy into supporting your friend, you'll have very little left for yourself or others. Setting boundaries can help. For example, let your friend know you're available on Tuesdays, but not other days.

Spending a lot of time with a loved one who has depression can take an emotional toll. Know your limits around difficult emotions, and make sure you take time to recharge.

#### **4. Keep making invitations**

Continue to extend invitations to socialise/chat, even if you know they're unlikely to accept. Tell your friend you understand they may not keep plans when they're in a rough patch and that there's no pressure to socialise until they're ready. Just remind them you're happy to see them.

## 5. Be patient

Depression usually improves with treatment, but even successful treatment doesn't always mean depression goes away entirely. Like all of us, they'll probably have some good days and some bad days. A good day doesn't mean they're "cured". Try not to get frustrated if a string of bad days makes it seem like your friend will never improve.

## 6. Stay in touch

Even when you aren't able to spend much time with them, check in with a text, phone call, or quick visit. A quick message of "I've been thinking of you" can help. Your friend may avoid reaching out, so you might have to work to maintain the friendship. But continuing to be a positive, supportive presence in your friend's life may make all the difference to them, even if they can't express that to you at the moment.

## 7. Learn about depression - for example:

[www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/depression/](http://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/depression/)

Be aware of other depression symptoms. Depression often involves sadness or a low mood, but it has other, less well-known symptoms: anger and irritability; confusion, memory problems, or difficulty focusing; excessive fatigue or sleep issues; stomach distress, frequent headaches, or back and other muscle pain.

Your friend may often seem to be in a bad mood, or feel exhausted a lot of the time. This is still part of depression, even if it doesn't fit into the stereotypical versions of depression.

## Serious suicidal thoughts when depressed

Signs for this can include:

frequent mood swings or personality changes / talking about death or dying / increased substance use / risky or dangerous behavior / getting rid of belongings or giving away treasured possessions / talking about feeling trapped or wanting a way out / pushing people away or saying they want to be left alone / saying goodbye with more feeling than usual

Ask your friend if they are seriously considering suicide. They may want to talk to someone about it but are unsure of how to bring up the difficult topic. If your friend is considering suicide, urge them to contact their doctor. You must also disclose this to us as it is a safeguarding concern.

## **How to help someone experiencing anxiety - as a befriender**

### **1. Don't pressure them**

Try not to put pressure on your friend or family member to do more than they feel comfortable with. It's really important to be patient, listen to their wishes and take things at a pace that feels okay for them.

It's understandable to want to help them face their fears or find practical solutions, but it can be very distressing for someone to feel they're being forced into situations before they feel ready. This could even make their anxiety worse. Try to remember that being unable to control their worries is part of having anxiety, and they aren't choosing how they feel.

Calmness and acceptance helps – not trying to dispel fears with 'rational' or 'logical' arguments.

### **2. Try to understand**

Ask about their experience. You could ask them how anxiety affects their day-to-day life, and what makes it better or worse. Listening to their experience could help you to empathise with how they feel. Be kind, be non-judgemental. Let them know it will pass and you are there.

### **3. Learn about anxiety - for example:**

[www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/anxiety-and-panic-attacks/](http://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/anxiety-and-panic-attacks/)

### **4. If someone is panicking**

Try to stay calm. Encourage them to breathe slowly and deeply – it can help to count out loud, or ask them to watch while you gently raise your arm up and down. Encourage them to sit somewhere quietly until they feel better.

### **5. Encourage them to seek help if needed**

If your friend's anxiety is becoming a problem for them, encourage them to seek appropriate treatment by talking to a GP or therapist. If you're concerned about your friend, talk to us about your worries and how you're feeling.

### **6. Look after yourself**

Set boundaries and don't take too much on. Decide what your limits are.