

How to Help Someone with Anxiety

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All of us worry and get scared from time to time. But those with anxiety may feel consumed by fears of things that might seem irrational to others. It can be hard to relate to these concerns, and as a result, many people don't know how to best help someone with anxiety.

"People are often dismissive of people experiencing anxiety," says Joseph McGuire, Ph.D., a pediatric psychologist with Johns Hopkins Medicine. "With other medical illnesses, you may be able to see physical symptoms. But with anxiety, you don't necessarily see what the person is dealing with. So it's important to be sensitive to what the person with anxiety is going through, even if it doesn't make sense to you."

It's distressing to watch a loved one experience panic attacks and face anxiety every day, but there are things you can do to help. It starts with recognizing the signs of excessive worry and understanding the best ways to support your loved one.

Learn to Recognize the Signs of Anxiety

Anxiety disorder is the most common mental health condition in the United States, affecting up to 18% of the population. Knowing the signs of anxiety can help you realize when someone you love is having fearful thoughts or feelings. Symptoms vary from person to person but can be broken into three categories:

Physical Symptoms

Some of the physical symptoms your loved one may report feeling include:

- Lightheadedness
- Sweating
- Nausea
- Feeling edgy and/or restless
- Shortness of breath
- Diarrhea
- Getting easily fatigued

Anxious Thoughts

People with anxiety often have thought patterns such as:

- Believing the worst will happen
- Persistent worry
- All-or-nothing thinking
- Overgeneralizing (making overall assumptions based on a single event)

Anxious Behaviors

Perhaps what you'll notice most is your loved one's behaviors. Common anxiety behaviors include:

- Avoidance of feared situations or events
- Seeking reassurance
- Second-guessing
- Irritability and frustration in feared situations
- Compulsive actions (like washing hands over and over)

Know What NOT to Do

Typical responses to someone with anxiety are often unhelpful. Here are actions you should avoid:

Don't Enable

It's common to want to help your loved one avoid painful situations by going out of your way to eliminate the cause for concern. "On the surface, this seems really thoughtful and sweet," says McGuire. "But anxiety doesn't usually go away. Over time, if people continually avoid facing difficult situations, the anxiety grows and special requests for accommodations get bigger."

If you continue to modify your behavior or the environment to accommodate your loved one's anxiety, this can unintentionally enable the anxiety to persist and grow. Avoiding difficult situations doesn't give your loved one the opportunity to overcome fears and learn how to master anxiety. Instead, it makes their world smaller as what they are able to do becomes more and more limited by their growing anxiety.

Don't Force Confrontation

On the other hand, it's also not good to force a person to do something they're scared of. "Trying to push somebody who's not ready can damage that relationship," warns McGuire. Learning how to overcome deep apprehension is work best done in partnership with a professional therapist. This takes the burden off you. It also empowers your loved one by helping them face their fears one step at a time with guidance from somebody with experience.

Use Anxiety Tips That Work

Responses based on love and acceptance, and the desire to see your loved one get better, are the cornerstones of helping someone with anxiety. Consider the following approaches:

Provide Validation

Many different things can make people anxious. Saying something like, "I can't believe you're getting upset over such a small thing" belittles a person's experience. Instead, ask your loved one how you can provide support during challenging moments.

"What makes one person fearful may be no big deal to someone else," says McGuire. "Their anxiety doesn't have to make sense to you—it's important to understand that what the person is experiencing is real and requires sensitivity."

Express Concern

"It's hard to see a loved one having an anxiety attack," says McGuire. "But in the moment, there's not too much you can do to shorten the duration or noticeably lower the intensity of a panic attack."

"When you start to notice your loved one withdrawing from activities that they used to enjoy, you don't have to cover up your concern. Instead, it can be helpful to approach your loved one in a warm and positive way," says McGuire. "You can start a dialogue by saying you've noticed certain behavior changes."

For example: "Hey, I noticed that you've been avoiding going to [insert location] and other social gatherings. Can you share with me what caused the change?" Then, depending on how the conversation goes, you might ask if they think they need some help or support in coping with their anxiety.

Know When to Seek Help

If your loved one's anxiety starts to impede their ability to enjoy life, interact at school, work or hang out with friends, or if it causes problems at home, then it's time to seek professional help.

Encourage a loved one to make an appointment with a mental health provider. "If they're resistant, you can remind them that it's just one appointment," says McGuire. "It doesn't mean they have to commit to treatment or to working with that specific therapist. It's really just an initial check-in, like an annual physical exam but for your mental and emotional health."

Source: <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/treatment-tests-and-therapies/how-to-help-someone-with-anxiety>