

5 Healing Ways to Help Someone Struggling With Depression or Anxiety

If the statistic is even somewhat true that 1 in 4 of us struggles with a mental health challenge, you are either struggling with this yourself or you know someone who is. And if you care at all, you'd like to truly help someone who is depressed or anxious. How do you do that?

Suicide Prevention Day reminded us that mental health disorders can be severe and life-threatening. If you or someone you know is at risk of harming him/herself now, call the Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-274-TALK (1-800-273-8255).

But there are many, many people who are in deep distress but are not at that moment of crisis right now. Providing support and help may prevent them from ever getting to that point.

While public policy and mental health services are important, what can you do as an individual? These are a few things to keep in mind.

1. Practice the ministry of presence.

There is rarely a more powerful ministry than that of presence. If you've ever been anxious or depressed yourself, remember how alone you felt. Pain often feels terribly isolating.

Jesus came to be *with* us (Matt. 1:23). He called His disciples that they might *with* Him (Mark 3:14).

If someone you care about is in a pit, you don't shout at them from the top, "Come on! Get out!" You get down there with them. You enter their world. They may struggle to believe you

are *with* them, that you truly care. But you do it anyway. And you don't swoop in for a moment and then run away. You stick around. (Keep reading. Hint: You don't stay there.)

2. Seek to understand.

You may never fully understand a hurting person's world and story, but you try to. You put your own preconceptions of the world on hold and look at things through their eyes.

What beliefs do they hold? What traumas have they experienced? What challenges have they faced, or do they face now? What past experiences have led them to respond as they are now?

This is usually "all of the above." There are physical elements involved such as lifestyle, biochemistry, genetics and so on. The struggling person always has a past: relationships, traumas, behavior patterns, life experiences. They have mental habits, thoughts and beliefs that shape their experience. And their experience of God—what they believe or don't believe about Him, and how they have experienced spirituality—also plays a role.

If you're not trained as a therapist, don't try to be one! But seeking to understand will help you be helpful.

3. Offer small bites.

You've seen images and videos of severely malnourished children. When such a child is brought to a medical facility, the helpers don't immediately set a pizza in front of them. When a person's system is overwhelmed, they can only take in nourishment in bite-sized doses, often in a much simpler form than a somewhat healthier person could do.

To whatever degree you have been able to understand the hurting person's world, imagine that you have jumped down into the pit with them. But what you may well have that the hurting person doesn't have is some appreciation of where the steps

are to climb out.

While the climb out may seem impossible to the person, you may be able to say, "Here, take my hand. Let me show you where one small step is, and I'll take that step with you."

4. Don't be the hero.

Helpers who try to be the hero can quickly get overwhelmed themselves, become burned out and are then unable to continue to be helpful. It's important to be a good enough student of yourself that you know what kinds of mental/emotional/spiritual nourishment you need and stay filled up yourself. That's the only way you will be of help to anyone.

And it's rare that trying to play the hero to the person who is hurting will make a lasting difference anyway. You can't "fix" them; don't try! You can't force help on anyone. You cannot control whether they get better or not.

Instead, if you've been able to enter their world to some degree, you may be extremely helpful by helping them help themselves. You can notice, encourage and celebrate small efforts, small improvements, small victories. Their feelings are true, but you can help remind them of the "rest of the truth." You can keep walking alongside the person as you help them see and take the steps needed to climb out.

5. Help them get help.

A friend who sticks around can be life-changing for many people. The epidemic of loneliness in our society is unhealthy in many ways. You are truly helpful by simply being there.

But there are many people who need and can benefit from additional help. A hurting person may struggle to reach out for help; you can help them do that. You can perhaps help them find a Christian coach through your church, a Christian

counselor or pastor, or a mental health professional if needed. In some cases it may help for you to actually take them to their appointment.

And of course help them experience God's intervention. When someone is hurting and feeling isolated, prayer must not be trite or overly religious. Invite Jesus to be present, and continue to do so. It's only in His presence that lasting transformation happens anyway.

You may be someone's lifeline. Take care to get your own nourishment along the way. And enjoy the privilege of being the hands and feet of Jesus to one of His children.

Your Turn: *Is someone you care about struggling with anxiety or depression? Have you tried to help? Does this framework help you understand better how you can help? Leave a comment below.* {eo}

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This article originally appeared at .

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