

More Than Sympathy: How to Help a Friend



What happens when you learn a friend has been diagnosed with a serious illness? Or perhaps you discover a relative of a co-worker has recently become ill or passed away. What do you do? Likely your first instinct is to try to help in some way. But how? It can be hard to know exactly what to do, what the person might need, or how your friend will feel supported. Here are some ideas on how to be of service to someone who is hurting.

Finding the Right Words

Words of support or condolence are incredibly impactful to someone who is hurting. But what do you say? Before reaching out with a letter or note of support, ask yourself a few basic questions:

- How well do you know the person? Have you been long-time friends or is the relationship relatively new? This can help you decide how casual or

- formal your message should be.
- How is the person handling the situation? Are they upbeat and meeting the challenge head-on, or are they struggling to cope? Knowing this can help you decide on the correct tone for your message – supportive, serious, or perhaps even humorous.
- How do you feel? Share your empathy, memories of a loved one, or support for their struggle.
- Do you struggle to get started? Get inspiration from online sources, inspirational quotes from books or beloved authors, and search ideas on the internet to get you started.
- When/how do you want to communicate? Although texts and emails are fast and convenient methods of communication, they may not always be the best option. Limited access to the Internet and electronics may prevent your message from being received. Also, text and emails tend to imply an obligation for the recipient to respond. This may not be possible. Consider sending a written note through mail or via a courier instead. A note card or letter can be appreciated and read over and over again, and it can be received without worry or obligation about sending a response.

Consider these helpful note-starters from Hallmark.com:

- I'm sorry, and I'm here for you.
- If you need anything, big or small, I'm here to help.
- I just want to remind you how strong you are.
- I believe in you.
- Take care of yourself...and listen to your doctors!
- I've always admired your ability to handle whatever life throws at you with grace and humor.

Try Actions Instead of Words

Although it is always appropriate to ask how you can help, this can be sometimes be a hard question for a person under strain to answer. When someone is battling a serious illness, even the most basic daily tasks become hard to do. Having someone there to step in and help can provide great comfort and relief. The idea here is to offer to help in some specific way, taking the burden of



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“If you want others to be happy, practice compassion. If you want to be happy, practice compassion.”

~ Dalai Lama



On Making a Difference



“We can’t help everyone, but everyone can help someone.” ~ Ronald Reagan

“Never doubt that a small group of othoughtful, committed citizens can change the world; indeed, it’s the only thing that ever has.” ~ Margaret Meade

“Always help someone. You might be the only one who does.” ~ Anonymous

“Anywhere I see suffering, that is where I want to be, doing what I can.” ~ Princess Diana

“Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love.” ~ Mother Teresa

“I found it is the small everyday deeds of ordinary folk that keep the darkness at bay...” ~ J.R.R. Tolkien

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decision-making off the other person’s shoulders.

One popular way to help is by providing a meal. Bake a favorite dessert, prepare freezer meals for future nights, or even coordinate a rotation among neighbors or friends so that meals are easy and reliable.

In addition to meals, helping with daily tasks can ease the burden of dealing with illness or loss. Some ideas:

- Make a quick call from the grocery store and ask if there is anything you can pick up for them.
- Offer to go to the post office and take their mail.
- Mow their lawn for them.
- Swing by and pick up their child to go to school or an activity.
- Stop by the hospital and offer to stay for an hour while a caregiver takes a break.
- Offer to come read, play a game, or spend time visiting with loved ones.

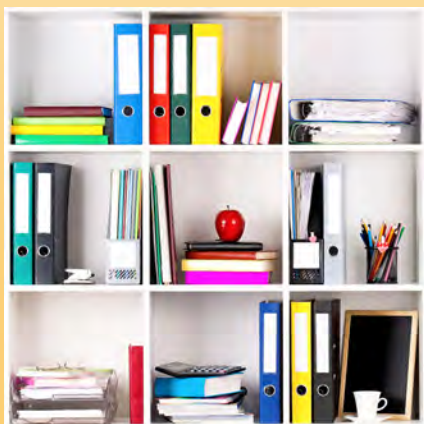
Just Be There

Sometimes when someone is in need, the best thing you can do is to be present. Be there for them. Let them know they are not alone. If it is convenient, stop by on a regular basis to ease the loneliness that often accompanies illness and mourning. One option can be to let them know you are there for them at a specific time, say every Wednesday from 1:00 – 3:00, for whatever they need. If just sitting together in silence and being present is all they need, that is OK too.

In the end, when asking yourself “What can I do?”, the only wrong answer is nothing. Whether it be through words, actions, or some other method, people who are suffering will benefit by knowing you care. Don’t miss an opportunity to let them know they have a friend.



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