THE CATALYST

Listen to Me – Supporting a Friend Experiencing a Mental Health Problem

Not having all the answers when supporting a friend experiencing a mental health difficulty is not necessarily a bad thing. Resist the urge to fix.

By: Yvette Murray | Posted: November 17, 2022

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Have you ever felt at a loss of what to say or do when a friend is going through a mental health difficulty? Or do you have an answer for their problem before they have finished telling you what their problem is? Not having all the answers when supporting a friend experiencing a mental health difficulty is not necessarily a bad thing. Resist the urge to fix. I dive deep into the topic of "support does not equal fixing" in my MHCC Catalyst article 'It's Broke- And Don't Fix it.'

The Problem Solver

The *wonderful, caring, hard-to-see-others-in-pain, jump-into-action-and-want-to-make-it-all-better person*… you relate? It can be uncomfortable seeing someone going through a mental well-being decline. Resist the urge to make it all better. Instead, pause and listen. Providing that safe space and really listening, I mean REALLY listening can be powerfully healing.

Don't take their problem from them, trust them to deal with it in their own way. Do your best to understand the person even when, from your lens, they may not make sense. Give them enough room to discover for themselves why they feel upset and enough time to think for themselves what's best. Hold back the desire to give them "good" advice.

The "Advice-or"

"Good" advice is relative: what may be good for me may not be for you. When you jump into "fix it" mode, the person sharing becomes aware they are not being listened to and possibly feels unheard and rejected. You may be trying to sort out the details (the who, what, when, where) and are not aware of the feelings or emotions behind the words.

A new study identifies 27 categories of emotion and shows how they blend together in our everyday experience. Most of us were never taught how to describe or name our feelings. Psychology once assumed that most human emotions fall within the universal categories of happiness, sadness, anger, surprise, fear, and disgust. Brene Brown hosts an informative, human centered TV series called *Atlas of the Heart* which dives deep in defining emotions, feelings and the words used to describe them.

As a psychotherapist, you may assume that I'm naturally a really great listener—I'm not! I really need practice at it. I'm already thinking of a response before the other person has finished

speaking, which creates disconnection. Or if there is a pause, I jump in with the word that I think they are thinking of and 90% of time I've got the wrong word! As a result, the person may feel rushed, thinking, "I better hurry or I won't be able to get a word in edgewise," or start to shut down and disengage. Really listening provides an environment where the person can show up authentically, with more of an opportunity to receive support.

Ask, Don't Tell

To truly support someone, "help me help you" really is a powerful approach. How do we do that? The first step is asking them! For example, ask questions like:

- "How can I best support you?"
- "What do you think would happen if you did this or that?"
- "How can I support you today?"
- "What does help look like for you?"

Getting clarity on what's being said, by paraphrasing and saying, "What I heard you say is" or "My understanding is…Is that correct?"

Don't assume how the person is feeling or what they "should" do. I often say, "don't let anyone should on you today and/or don't should on yourself."

The Empathizer

Empathy is not connecting to an experience; it's connecting to the emotions that underpin an experience. Sympathy is "feeling *for* me" and can be perceived as condescending. Empathy is "feeling *with* me."

In order for one to be empathetic, it requires seeing the world as others see it, or seeing it from their perspective. Stay away from judgment, not putting our beliefs on how things "should" be onto others. Do your best to understand another person's feelings and communicate your understanding of that person's feelings. Be aware of your own feelings and boundaries.

Listening Fatigue

Know that when you really listen it can be tiring, it takes energy. It may also stir up emotions for you or trigger memories of previous experiences. Self-care is an integral part of being an effective listener. Some may say self-care is selfish, especially when others have "got it worse." Selfish is when you do things that are a detriment to others; self-care is when you have self-interest and are in care of yourself for the benefit of others (and yourself). This is a critically important distinction.

When you are thanked for listening, accept the gift of gratitude, and let them know it was good to know that you have been helpful. This also helps the person not feel like they've just burdened you with their "problems."

When listening and supporting a friend experiencing a mental health difficulty, practice listening as a receiver, not as a critic, and practice to understand the other person rather than to achieve either agreement from, or change in, that person.

"To be fully seen by somebody, then, and to be loved anyhow—this is a human offering that can border on miraculous" – Elizabeth Gilbert

Author: Yvette Murray

Lives in Tiny Beaches on Georgian Bay, which she considers her sanctuary. She believes that being surrounded by nature does wonders for her mental health. Yvette is the author of The Mental Health Contagion: Navigating Yourself Through a Loved One's Mental Well-Being Decline (forthcoming). Yvette is a mental health advocate, influencer, and keynote speaker; a psychotherapist; and a facilitator for the MHCC's Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) virtual certification program. MHFA is available for those who are supporting adults, youth, and/or older adults. It trains participants on how to recognize a loved one's mental health problem, have that conversation, and get the best help.

Mental Health Commission of Canada
https://mentalhealthcommission.ca/
350 Albert Street, Suite 1210 Ottawa ON K1R 1A4
Tel: 613.683.3755 | Fax: 613.798.2989
mhccinfo@mentalhealthcommission.ca