




Anxiety Allies: Supporting Loved Ones Through Anxiety

As anxiety continues to be one of the most common mental health conditions in both adults and children, millions of people are left wondering how to help others navigate the challenges associated with anxiety disorders. During times of need, our words and actions can be powerful sources of support and resources for our loved ones.



Anxiety: What to Say and How to Help Understand Anxiety

Beyond healthy anxiety, anxiety disorders can cause overwhelming fear and worry. Our words and actions can support those in need.



Identify & Communicate

Create safe spaces in relationships to check in and openly share mental health concerns.

Say: "I have noticed... [blank], and I am concerned".

Show Respect & Dignity

Respect their choices, timing, and capabilities without judgment or shame.

Say: "You matter to me; let us figure out what is best for you when you are ready."

Be Present

Being there for someone during tough times shows they are valuable and cared for.

Say: "I am always here for you, whatever you may need from me."

Listen


Listen, empathize, and support. Sharing openly about struggles can feel vulnerable and takes courage.



Say: "I hear you." And "We can talk about this for as long as you need."


Validate

Acknowledge their experiences sensitively without shaming or minimizing them.

Say: "That sounds really difficult."



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- **Understand anxiety and when help may be needed.** Anxiety is normal, healthy, and helpful for motivating and protecting us. Anxiety keeps us safe and alerts us to danger, helps us to focus on what is essential, and engages our natural defenses.
 - Anxiety is good in small doses, but chronic and intense anxiety can be debilitating. Helpful anxiety becomes a disorder when daily life becomes impaired by seeing danger where there is none.
 - **Recognize the signs and communicate your concerns.** Express genuine, heartfelt concerns in clear and concise language. Focus on observable behavioral changes and effects on their daily life and relationships. When we avoid conversations about mental health concerns, we give them power and communicate that it is not okay to talk about feelings and worries.
 - Say: “I have noticed... and I am concerned”.
 - **Show them respect and dignity.** Honor their independence, capabilities, and power to make their own decisions at their own pace, free from shame, judgments, and pressure to follow specific paths.
 - Say: “You matter to me; let us figure out what is best for you when you are ready.”
 - **Be Present.** Showing up and sticking around during tough times is a powerful way to communicate to someone that they are valuable and worth your time, even when you may not know what to say or do.
 - Say: “I am always here for you, whatever you may need from me.”

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- **Listen.** Even the smallest moments of listening can reground someone struggling with anxiety. Show them support and honor the confidence that it takes to share openly about their struggles.
 - Say: “I hear you.” And “We can talk about this for as long as you need.”
 - **Validate Their Experiences.** What they are experiencing is real and needs sensitivity. Listen and respond in a way that does not minimize their experience and acknowledge their suffering without shame.
 - Say: “That sounds really difficult.”
 - **Know What Is Not Helpful.** Even when we mean well, there are things that we can say and do that are not helpful and can even be harmful to others.
 - Do not unquestioningly give reassurance, dismiss their feelings, or communicate that their feelings are wrong.
 - Do not suggest trendy lifestyle changes or other ideas that may or may not work, especially unsolicited. Everyone has different needs, and some things that work for one person may not work for another.
 - Do not repeatedly ask them if they are okay. This may pressure them into feeling they need to get better now, feel overwhelmed by expectations to provide regular updates, or pressure to appease you with responses that make you feel more comfortable.
 - Do not enable avoidance. Going out of your way to help them avoid anxieties can seem thoughtful, but over time, it makes their world smaller and decreases the skills they need to navigate discomfort.
 - Do not force confrontation from someone who is not ready.

Supporting Loved Ones With Anxiety

Understand Anxiety

Anxiety is a normal and healthy protective factor in our lives. However, excessive fear and worry can impair our abilities to function normally.

Identify & Communicate

Create spaces for mental health check-ins and open conversations in relationships. Communicate any concerns you may have with clear language focused on observed changes and their impacts.

Show Respect & Dignity

Empower them to make their own choices based on what works best for them. Respect their choices, pace, and capabilities without judgment or shame.

Be Present

Showing up and being supportive during difficult times is a meaningful way to show someone they matter, even if you do not know what to say or do.

Listen

Even a moment of listening can help those struggling to feel supported and heard. Honor the courage it takes to share openly about anxiety with empathy and understanding.

Validate

Acknowledge the reality of their experiences and respond sensitively without shaming them or minimizing their suffering.

Ultimately, when it comes to supporting a loved one with anxiety, the most important thing that we can do is to know that their feelings- and the fact that they are talking to you about them- are a big deal. When we show up for one another, communicate their value, and consider their experiences, we can considerably impact their lives and well-being.

Meet the Creator! Brianna White, LISW, CCTP-II, CCATP

Brianna White, LISW, has a passion for normalizing conversations about mental health and improving access to mental health resources and services that promote well-being in individuals and communities. Brianna works as a therapist with Tanager's school based therapy program, proudly serving Benton Community Schools.

