

COVID-19

SOMEONE TO LEAN ON: HOW TO BE SUPPORTIVE

When someone you care about is going through a tough time you might feel helpless or under pressure to have all the answers. But there are simple ways you can provide meaningful support that don't require an expert.

The situation doesn't really matter, when someone you know is upset or feeling low, all you want to do is help. But how? Often if something has happened that is particularly distressing - like a bereavement, illness or divorce - you might avoid talking about it because you feel awkward and worried about making the situation worse.

You might also find that a loved one's distress makes you feel upset too. While you can't fix the situation for them, you can learn to be a solid shoulder to lean on without letting the situation get to you. Here's how... [1]

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Try to be there

You might feel unsure about what to say, but in the end words don't matter as much as just being there. So, pick up the phone, write a letter or arrange to meet up. Don't wait to be asked, take the initiative yourself. It's also important to stay in touch over time. Just because a few months have passed doesn't mean they won't appreciate a quick hello. If the person is someone you live with or see often, 'check-in' regularly to ask how they're feeling.

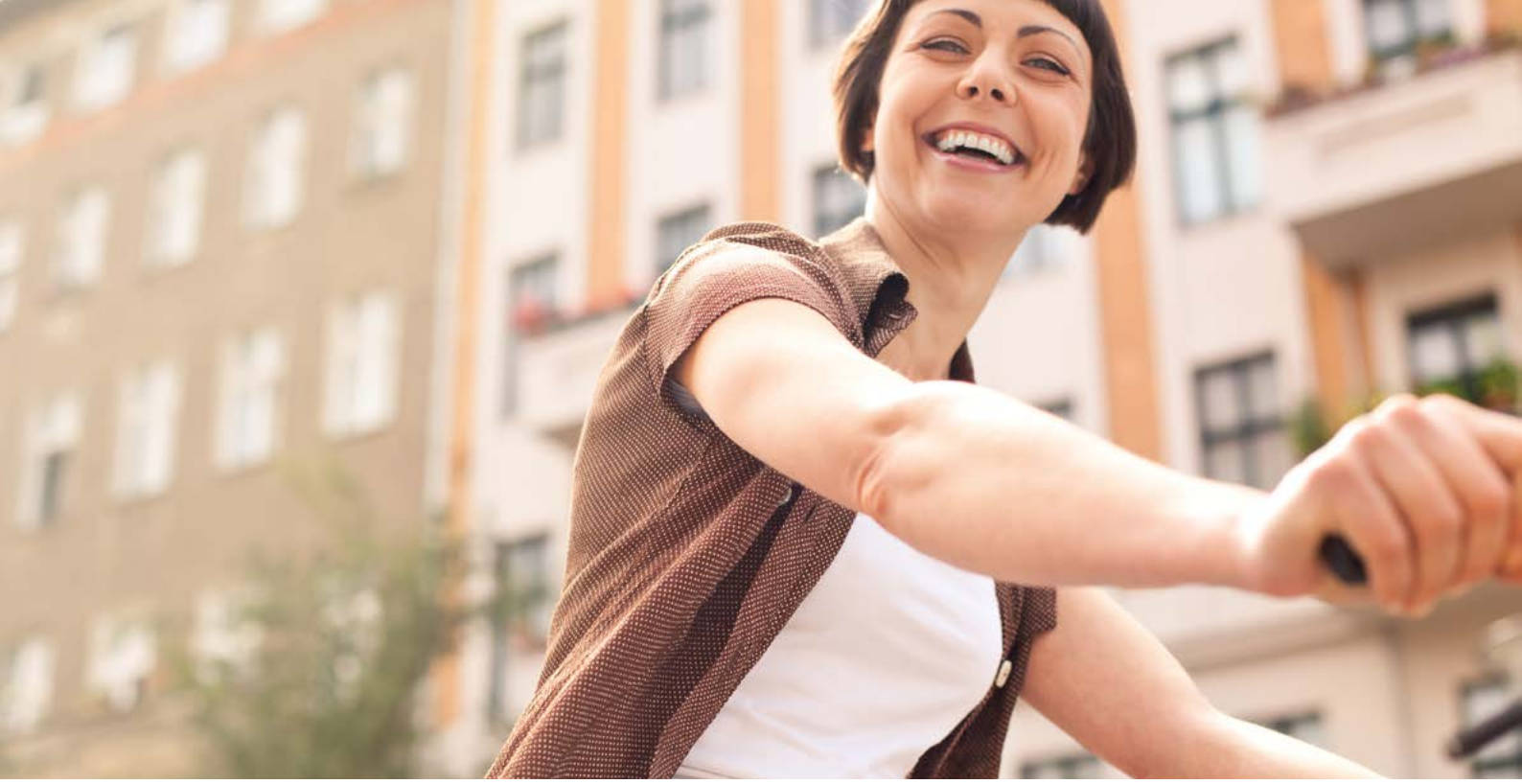
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Listen

When someone tells you about a problem it's a very human response to want to help fix it. Of course it depends on the situation, but sometimes the most useful thing you can do is offer a friendly ear without offering advice. By voicing out loud how they're feeling to you, you're helping.

Be accepting

Often someone who isn't feeling themselves will experience a range of emotions. Try to create an environment where they feel free to cry, get angry or break down without putting on a front. And don't take extreme reactions too personally. Reasoning with them, encouraging them to be more positive or saying how they should or shouldn't be feeling might seem like you don't understand where they're coming from.



Offer practical help

Do they need help picking the kids up from school? Making an evening meal? Accompanying to the hospital? Taking them out to do something they enjoy? Offering practical help can be really useful, and even if they don't accept – it shows that you care.

Take a break

Providing a shoulder to lean on can be quite an intense experience. You don't need to feel guilty about taking time out for yourself. It's also important that you seek support too. Don't try to shoulder this experience alone, talk to your friends and family about how you're feeling. Even the most experienced counsellor needs support.



Someone who looks like they're coping on the outside might be feeling pretty troubled on the inside.

Try not to judge by appearance

Someone who looks like they're coping on the outside might be feeling pretty troubled on the inside. Saying things like 'you're being so strong' or 'you're coping so well' might put pressure on that person to keep up appearances and hide how they're truly feeling.



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Do not make assumptions

If you've lived through something similar then you can probably anticipate what the person you care about is going through. But everyone experiences things differently, so you can't ever truly 'know how someone feels'. It's good to share what happened to you, but claiming to 'know' how someone 'must' be feeling might sound like you're not truly listening them as an individual.

Don't force it

Your friend or relative may not want to talk. If this is the case, your presence itself will be reassuring. You could offer a hug, squeeze of the hand or simply eye contact.



Help! I need somebody!

It's not always easy for someone who's hurting to ask for help so it can be helpful to be able to spot the signs that someone is struggling. Common symptoms include:[2]

- Excessive emotional reactions to relatively normal situations
- Loss of interest in social activities
- Inability to cope with daily life
- Extreme fatigue
- Feeling inadequate

The main thing to remember is that you are doing a world of good just by being there.

References:

1. How to help someone bereaved. Cruse Bereavement Care. https://www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/about-grief/how-to-help-someone-bereaved. Visited 10 June 2020.
2. Depression. Royal College of Psychiatrists. https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/mental-health/problems-disorders/depression. Visited 10 June 2020.

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