

Opening Our Eyes

What would YOU say? Responding to "I am SO depressed"

by Nan Dickie

If it hasn't happened to you yet, it may. A friend or loved one blurts out, or whispers, "I'm so depressed;" or, "I can barely get through each day;" or, "I feel so awful; I'm afraid I may hurt myself." Or, you may notice that she is sleeping an inordinate time, eating very little, and has no energy. Or he is isolating himself, his eyes always lowered, and he's not doing any of the things he usually enjoys. These comments and behaviours may indicate an episode of clinical depression.

We're not comfortable hearing statements such as these. No matter how they express it, depressed people are courageously reaching out to you in their emotional and mental pain, while being convinced that they are failures.

Given all of that, what would you say to her? How would you respond to him?

The first thing to know, and remember, is what a depressed person wants most of all - to be heard, to be believed, and to be respected. You have an opportunity to provide this safe space. You may feel nervous - the knee-jerk reaction is often "What am I supposed to do here?" whereas the best thing is simply to listen and be present.

When well-intentioned people offer responses that don't come across well, it is often because they don't know what to say. So, what are helpful responses? First I'll offer what usually doesn't work.

If you respond by saying something like "Lighten up; the world isn't falling apart," or "You don't have any reason to be depressed; you're smart; you've got a job; you have lots of friends," you are not helping. In these cases, you are simply reacting, not responding sensitively to him or her.

You may feel you are empathizing with your friend by saying "I know what you mean. I've been depressed too." You may well get depressed. But unless you have a mood disorder as they do, your experience of depression will be qualitatively different than theirs.

Sometimes well-meaning people want to help a person who is depressed in some practical way. But the depressed person may not want help. Suggesting "solutions" can backfire - the depressed person may feel worse because your strategy didn't work for them.

What responses to "I am so depressed" are more likely to work?

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You could quietly say, to start, "I'm very sorry to hear that." You are showing the person that you care and you hear their pain. Or, "Would you like to talk about it?" You are indicating openness and willingness to hear more, to stay with the person. Or "Is there anything I can do?" You are letting them know that you are willing to get involved for now in some way that the depressed person needs. Or "Do you think seeing someone (your therapist, counsellor, family doctor, psychiatrist) would help?" Medical attention may be imperative. People who are depressed - clinically or not - often can't think clearly or make decisions easily.

If you say, "May I phone you in a few days?" you are indicating that you will not just disappear. If they say something like, "Oh, it doesn't matter," you need to say, "I'll give you a call in a few days," and then do it.

I really appreciate when a friend says, "I'll be thinking about you," because I feel so alone and isolated when I'm depressed. Sometimes, when I feel particularly low, I will phone a friend and say, "I just need you to know that I am having a tough time right now. I don't want you to do anything. I just need you to know." It's a life-line.

If your loved one has already experienced an episode of depression, you could respond with, "I'm so sorry. I know how tough it was for you last time;" or, "Do you remember what you did last time that helped you through it?"

After you have given your initial response, listen and wait. Don't jump in. If he doesn't say anything, be silent for a few minutes. He may need to spill out a lot of built up pain and fear. Let him release it. Don't hesitate to ask her, "Are you afraid of harming yourself?" or, "Do you feel safe?" If she is suicidal, take her to the hospital now. Stay with him until he feels safe to be on his own.

Now it's time to consider you, the other person in this dyad, the one who has been compassionately listening and responding to a depressed friend or loved one. You need to look after yourself, to set boundaries. It doesn't help either of you if you get overly-emotionally involved. You need to replenish. Share your feelings with a close friend. Talk to a professional, if necessary.

[Nan Dickie has lived with clinical depression since her teens. She is the peer facilitator of the local depression support group (DSG). Meetings take place the first and third Mondays at Askews Uptown conference room at noon (including Mondays of long weekends). Everyone welcome. Info: ndickie@telus.net; 250 832-3733.]