

How to Be a Good Listener for Someone with a Mental Health Issue

In these times of great stress and anxiety, it certainly feels as though we're all thinking and talking about our mental health more than ever before. Which is a good thing – talking about our feelings and concerns with those we trust is an important part of our mental health.

But what about when someone else needs to do the talking?

Even if you're totally comfortable talking about your mental health, it can be a really intimidating and scary process for others – trying to open up so they can share some very personal stuff isn't an easy thing to do. Especially when they're feeling vulnerable and worried about judgment.

If someone is ready to talk, that means they're also looking for support. And if they're chosen you to open up to, here's your chance to be the supportive ear they're looking for!

Be patient and engaged

Think back to a time when you wanted to talk about your mental health, but because of nerves or fear or anxiety, you struggled with the right words. It can be just as intimidating for someone else to open up to you, so it's important to remember to let them take the time they need to share.

You might want to plan ahead so that your conversation happens in a comfortable, private place where the other person feels safe. Understand that it's also the kind of conversation that may take some time – it's not like a work meeting with an agenda and a fixed schedule, but rather something that requires lots of patience.

When the talking does happen, it's very helpful to be fully engaged. Listen deeply, encourage them through eye contact, open body language, and lots of empathetic responses. After all, the safer and trusting a person feels, the easier it will be for them to share with you.

Validation really helps

As a listener, it's very helpful to remember that you aren't available to judge someone's struggles, nor are you there to offer solutions. By hearing them while remaining in a listening role, you can help to validate their emotions – “I understand that you're upset,” “Your emotions are valid,” and “You don't have to struggle with this on your own,” are all ways to show that you're taking the conversation seriously. After all, only they know what it's like to be them.

Through validation, you are letting them know that their problems are worth being concerned about, worth talking about, and that they deserve to be listened to.

Don't forget to check in with yourself too

It's never that easy for someone else to open up and discuss their mental health struggles, but at the same time, it can be a challenge to listen to someone experiencing these things,

too. In order to remain engaged and active as a listener, it's important to check in with your own mental health as well.

This can mean remembering to practice self-care after a conversation takes place – allotting the time for you to relax, decompress and process what you've just been hearing. However, this can also mean understanding your limits as a listener; if you feel that the person needs the kind of professional help that you cannot offer, it's perfectly reasonable to suggest this.

Simply listening can be a supportive and caring act for someone struggling with their mental health. Although they may be nervous or intimidated about sharing their very personal experiences, by being patient, engaged and empathetic to their situation, you can let them know that they don't have to struggle alone.