What Not to Say to Someone With Anxiety

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7 Unhelpful Comments to Avoid, and What to Say Instead

It seems like anxiety is on the rise. If you know more than 10 people, chances are great that you know someone with an anxiety disorder. Generalized anxiety disorder will target about 9% of people throughout their life, and that is only one of several common anxiety disorders.

With all of this anxiety around you, it is natural that you want to take steps to help the people around you. After all, you are a caring, loving person who is interested in their wellbeing.

Helping someone with anxiety can be a confusing proposition, though. Most of the time you're not sure if you should say anything – would it even be helpful?

The truth is that talking to people about their anxiety can be a huge benefit to you and them, but the threat of damage exists. Because of this, you must be aware of the risky things to say to someone with anxiety.

"You just need to relax."

Yes. This statement is true, but for the person with an anxiety disorder, it feels like an impossibility. Their mind and body are so used to being tense that they have probably forgotten what true relaxation feels like. If they could relax, they would without hesitation. It is easier said than done.

Try this: "It seems like your anxiety is high. We should sit down to research some relaxation techniques that could help. I heard the progressive muscle relaxation can do some good for people with physical tension."

"You just need to clear your mind."

People with anxiety would love nothing more than having a clear, calm mind. Sometimes it just isn't in the cards. Just like with the example listed above, if they could clear their mind, they would.

Anxiety fills their mind will so much fear, dread, worry and extraneous information that clarity is impossible to obtain. People without anxiety can never know the shear quantity of information that fills someone's mind or the speed at which ideas spin.

Try this: "If you are having a hard time dealing with your thoughts or your worries, you could talk to me about them. If that doesn't seem very comfortable for you, you could try writing them down. I hear people have success with that."

"Just take a couple of deep breaths and count to 10."

When people think about effective relaxation techniques, they tend to oversimplify the diaphragmatic breathing

exercise. They think that “taking a few deep breathes” will do a world of good and can improve even the most severe anxiety. This, of course, is not true.

Deep breathing is a great notion built from a tested relaxation technique, but it must be practiced during calm periods before it can be used in high-anxiety situations. Usually, when people with high anxiety try deep breathing, it makes their anxiety worse because their deep breathing is more of a hyperventilation with shallow breathing. In this case, “a few deep breaths” can do more bad than good.

Try this: “I did some research about panic attacks and deep breathing. I printed out some information. I would love to go over it together sometime because I think it could help.”

“You would feel better if you got out more.”

This one is true, but that doesn’t make it an appropriate thing to say. This one is like saying, “You would feel better if you ate better and exercised more,” to an overweight person. They know this would help. They know that getting out would make their symptoms much better in the long-term. The problem is that the short-term risks are too great to ignore.

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Compounding the problem is the notion that people with anxiety will be unable to conceive promising opportunities or events to participate in outside of their home because they are so negative and disconnected. Even if they wanted to get out, they would have no idea where to go or what to do.

Try this: I am going out later and I really want you to come with me. We could go whenever you want and leave when you are feeling uncomfortable. When should I pick you up?

“Maybe you are having a heart attack.”

When someone is having a panic attack, the physical symptoms are amazingly intense. They cannot breathe. They experience anxiety and chest pain, where they feel extreme tightness and pressure in their chest. Their vision can become blurred as they break out in a cold sweat. It is anything but comfortable.

With all of these physical symptoms, it is challenging for them to remember that the source is mental rather than physical. They are not having a heart attack, a seizure or a stroke. Being safe and erring on the side of caution is always a good idea, but if your concern creates more anxiety by increasing worry, this statement will not give the help your loved one is looking for.

Try this: “Maybe your anxiety is high right now, and its sparking some physical symptoms. Remember, this is discomfort – not danger. You’re going to be okay.”

“Why don’t you have a couple drinks to relax?”

If someone is feeling a little nervous or uncomfortable, especially in social situation, having a few drinks of alcohol is the perfect way to relax and unwind, right? Not right! Certainly, alcohol is not problematic in moderation, but people with anxiety are at greater risk of using alcohol as self-medication.

In the world of anxiety, there are positive coping skills and negative coping skills. Positive coping skills are focused on finding lasting solutions where negative coping skills are interested in quick fixes. Alcohol does not improve the situation. It only covers it up so they don’t have to think about it for a day. Tomorrow, the same problems return.

Try this: “Things might feel scary at first, but the longer you’re there, the better you’ll feel. Let’s have you get comfortable the right way.”

“My medication works for me. Try some.”

First of all, taking someone else’s medication is never a good idea. If it is a fast-acting antianxiety medication like a benzodiazepine that you have been taking for several years, you have built up a tolerance to it. Your loved one has not. It could lead to severe side effects or even death. Secondly, giving your medication to someone else is illegal and could land you in major legal trouble. Again, this situation helps no one.

Try this: “I take medication for anxiety. Maybe you should consider talking to a prescriber about your symptoms to see if something would help.”

Conclusion

The secret to helping someone with anxiety is being willing to do the work to make lasting improvements. Avoid the quick fixes, shortcuts and finger-pointing to help the people in your life.

Saying the wrong thing could end with less supports and more anxiety. No one wins in that scenario. You will have to choose between what is easy and what is best. Unfortunately, they are rarely the same.