



**R**emember that you don't have to be an expert or a therapist to listen and show that you care. Learn more about anxiety. Information about anxiety is easily accessible on the web and in self-help books.

# Supporting a Friend Who is Anxious

If you are a friend, partner or family member of a student who is experiencing difficulties with anxiety, the following suggestions may be helpful as you work to provide your support.

- Remember that it's not your job to cure the anxiety. Ultimately, it is up to the person experiencing the anxiety to decide to work to overcome it or not. If you believe that effort isn't being put forth/progress isn't being made, ask the person with anxiety what s/he thinks needs to happen next. However, it is unrealistic for you to become the person's motivator and monitor. Decide together on a realistic and agreeable plan.
- Be honest with yourself and others about what you can and cannot provide. Say no if you will feel burdened and unable to provide the assistance that is being requested.
- Be patient. Difficulties with panic take time and work to overcome. This is not the time for unsolicited advice or criticism. Also, pressure is a poor motivator.
- Show sincere interest and optimism. Being supportive and encouraging goes a long way.
- Acknowledge the anxiety without being harsh or judgmental. "I can see that this is really difficult for you. It seems that anxiety can be so frustrating and overwhelming."
- You may have some strong ideas about what you think might be helpful. Be cautious in offering these. Respect the anxious person's effort and ability. Consult with experts if need be.
- Acknowledge any progress you see, no matter how small or slow. Progress is progress.
- Offer to role-play anxious situations (e.g., be the professor and listen to a dry run of the class presentation).
- Recognize that lasting change is typically the result of slow and careful steps. Encourage practice in this way.
- When asked, provide honest (and gentle) feedback. You may be able to offer ideas about distorted thinking, avoidance behavior and emotional issues that may be perpetuating the anxiety.
- Be very cautious about accompanying your friend or family member to feared situations. Doing so is often a poor anxiety management strategy that will delay a person's ability to discover s/he can cope on her/his own.

## **IF YOU SUSPECT SUICIDAL THOUGHTS, TAKE ACTION IMMEDIATELY**

Take your friend or family member seriously if s/he talks about suicide. S/he needs to see a doctor or mental health professional if s/he has thoughts of suicide. Get help IMMEDIATELY if s/he is so distressed that s/he cannot think of any other solution except suicide, fears s/he will harm her/himself, secures a means to self-harm (e.g., finds pills or a gun) or tells you about a plan to attempt suicide. NEVER agree to keep plans for suicide a secret, even if your friend becomes angry and claims you will be betraying trust if you tell others. It is an act of true caring to take action when your friend most needs assistance. Call an ambulance or 911, take your friend to the emergency room at the hospital or to his/her doctor, or call the suicide crisis line number in the front of the phone book.

- Be aware that, in some situations, providing reassurance (e.g., "Don't worry, it won't be that bad.") may actually work against improved anxiety management. For an anxious person, reassurance can become a form of avoidance. Depending on the reassurance of other people makes it difficult for an anxious person to fully experience her/his anxiety (the goal in order to overcome anxiety) and develop ways to be self-reassuring. So, how do you know when it is helpful to provide reassurance? Generally, if the situation is one that the anxious person is working to no longer avoid, escape from, or endure with distress, refrain from providing reassuring statements. Simply acknowledge the anxiety and the effort being put forth to address it. If the situation is such that, as a non-anxious person, you believe you would benefit from reassurance, provide it.
- Have fun together.
- If you continually feel overwhelmed by the anxious person's level of distress and unsure of how to help, seek professional assistance.
- If your friend or family member is using drugs or alcohol to cope with anxiety, encourage him/her to seek assistance from a physician or mental health professional.
- If your friend or family member has become depressed as a result of difficulties with anxiety, encourage him/her to seek professional assistance from a physician or counselor as soon as possible. Timely treatment can reduce suffering and facilitate improved mood and ability to manage anxiety.

Adapted from DuPont, Spencer and Dupont (1998)