Tips for Improving Communication When You Have Depression

by ERIC PATTERSON

Depression and Communication: Get Ready to Listen

Lana Barhum and Eric Patterson share advice for dealing with the communication issues that can accompany depression.

Depression weakens your communication skills. It changes the way you speak to others and the way you express yourself.

Naturally, you want to improve your communication, so you read a lot about depression and communication, including assertive communication and have even been practicing your new skills with friends.

Though articulating your ideas verbally to others is crucial for improving or maintaining relationships, you may find your resources better spent another way.

Understanding Depression and Communication Problems

People who suffer from depression tend to have negative thoughts, which make their depression symptoms worse. The best way to manage feelings of disinterest, discouragement and helplessness is through supportive communication.

However, people with depression are often so overwhelmed with depressive symptoms to the point the symptoms impair their ability to communicate effectively. Communication processes between the depressed person and their loved ones start to take on a whole new level of complexity.

Due to no fault of their own, depressed people are hard to be friends with or have a relationship with. It is hard to communicate and be with someone who feels down and dark and cannot see the good in anything.

This doesn’t mean you should give up on your depressed loved one.

Effect on Intimate Relationships

The impact of depression on your relationships is specific to the person depressed.

For example, depression varies between the sexes. Depressed women experience feelings of sadness, guilt and lack of confidence. While men, on the other hand, respond with anger and frustration.

How depression affects relationships also depends on changes in those relationships. Depression could break down responsibilities at home and outside of the home, causing further relationship problems.

One 2015 study reported in the journal, *Communication Monographs*, finds depression creates significant barriers

in communication and commitment in couples. According to the study researchers, social withdrawal, fear of conflict and lack of adequate coping skills are some reasons for communication breakdowns.

What to Understand and How to Respond

One of the most challenging parts of living with depression is the stigma and negative criticisms that often come from those closest to us who don't understand the extent of depression. Most people don't know their comments can be harmful or discouraging or that they make a loved one's depression worse by being critical.

There are some things to keep in mind to help you better communicate with your depressed loved one. Further, there are constructive ways to express that do not come across as hostile or critical.

Reach Out

I feel like one the biggest assumptions people make is that depressed people want to be left alone. This can be true sometimes, but depressed people still need friendship, communication and just someone to show kindness and caring the rest of the time.

This misconception is one that causes many communication breakdowns. The next time you find your loved one is struggling with depressed feelings, find ways to be friendly and engaging, rather than keeping your distance.

Depression Burden

When you are depressed, you do everything you can to hide your struggle because you are afraid of the burden that places on your loved ones. Depressed people are not seeking attention or coddling; they want to manage their depression effectively, get better, and not feel emotional pain.

Depressed people push aside their feelings so that they don't hurt, or burden loved ones. However, this tends to backfire as support is necessary for recovery.

Therefore, it is important to remind your depressed loved one you love them and accept them regardless of what is going on with them. Further, share all the things you do love about them.

Caring Too Much

Depressed people care a lot about how their loved ones feel and perceive them, how they see themselves and what others need from them. Unfortunately, they might care too much, which is one of the many reasons they may suffer from depression.

When communicating with your depressed loved one, it is important to be clear about what you need and doesn't need. Remember to be considerate and respectful.

Treat Us as You Do Everyone

No walking around on eggshells or tiptoeing. It is okay to behave as if your loved one is healthy, and not fragile.

Normalcy, predictability and routine are the best ways to be supportive and keep the lines of communication open between you and your depressed loved one.

We Plan to Win

I know firsthand battling depression is a lifelong struggle. Regardless, it is a fight that must be won.

For every person living with depression, the plan isn't to lose the battle or live a life of defeat. Although we know this, it important for our loved ones to continuously remind us that it gets better and there are resources out there

to help us.

Even if someone with depression insists they're fine, don’t give up on that person. Be there and offer support without pressure.

Silence is Allowed

Depressed people try hard to be happy and engaging and sometimes, all they have to offer is their presence and silence. And you can offer yours.

Make it simple. Just sit with them, watch a movie, go out to lunch or have coffee. Unless they want to talk, just let the time pass and don’t say a thing.

Let Some Things Go

Irritability is a symptom of depression. Of course, there is no reason to treat people badly, but sometimes you just must let things go to keep the lines of communication open.

Just remember to set boundaries and expectations to keep the relationship harmonious. After all, there must still be respect for you and your depressed loved one.

Listen Up! Tips for Improving Your Listening Skills

The biggest difference between simply hearing something and listening is attention. The tips below will help you boost your awareness to get quality information. Better information means less risk of misunderstandings resulting in depression.

Here’s how:

1. **Be quiet.** Often, when people wish to give you data or their opinion of an event or a situation, they want you to be quiet. Interrupting or finishing their sentences will distract you and the person speaking. If you tend to speak more during conversations, make it a point to say very little. Speaking eliminates your ability to listen since you cannot do both simultaneously.
2. **Be prepared.** Being prepared to listen means getting yourself in an appropriate environment mentally and physically. If there is loud music playing or distractions from a crying baby, your ability to listen will be poor. Having a quiet place with limited disruptions will aid the conversation. Similarly, if you are having trouble paying attention mentally, tell the other person. Perhaps, they have a suggestion or can reschedule the conversation for another time.
3. **Be kind.** The more relaxed and comfortable the speaker is, the better your chance to get clear and concise information. Maintaining good, nonverbal listening skills like smiling, nodding and making good eye contact are great ways to get the speaker feeling calm. Besides yielding better communication, using desired non-verbals is a way to show someone you care and value them.
4. **Be understanding.** Rather than filtering the information through your perspective, try to understand the other person’s point of view. This is having an empathic understanding, and it helps strengthen relationships. At this stage, it is not about being right or wrong; it is about gathering information from a source. You can process the information and draw conclusions at a later stage.

People just building listening skills will need a lot of practice to implement these tips properly. Advanced listeners will be able to work on the fifth tip.

5. **Be observant.** Taking note of tone, rate of speech, themes of discussion, hand movements, word selection and other aspects of the verbal communication supplies you with a more inclusive picture of the message. Read between the lines but do so with caution. This is a good opportunity for depression to distort the facts. Stay objective.

Conclusion

If you find you are having more disagreements and conflicts with people in your life, investigate your listening.

Are you using good active listening skills? Are you putting yourself in a good environment to listen or are other issues distracting you?

Once listening improves, all aspects of relationships will follow. Ready, set, listen!