

# When friendship is critical

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## There are many ways to help a loved one through illness

Recently, I have had a few clients come to see me because they were worried about a friend or family member going through a critical illness. One woman said she wanted to be supportive, yet was concerned about being too pushy or intrusive.

I told her how lucky her friend is to have such kind and compassionate support. Here is some advice if you are dealing with a similar issue.

When someone gets a critical diagnosis, she often goes through the same emotional stages as someone who is dying. Just the diagnosis itself can create shock and disbelief. It can make the individual feel vulnerable and fearful of the future.

The Kübler-ross model, often used to describe the grieving process, states that many people go through several stages when facing death. It starts with denial, then anger, bargaining, depression and then acceptance. Not everyone goes through all these stages, and the order may vary, but it gives you an idea of what your friend might be experiencing after a traumatic diagnosis or event. Your friend might not be grieving the loss of life, but she can grieve the loss of feeling safe and invulnerable.

Most of us go through life with a belief that if we do our job, work hard and follow the rules, we will stay safe, and nothing too devastating will happen to us. It is a kind of universal denial to feel powerful. So when you are the friend, sister or cousin of someone who has had an accident or lost a house in a fire, for example, you may react on two levels.

On the one hand, you may feel shocked, sad and worried, and want to be supportive. On another level, if your closest friend has been diagnosed with a critical illness, and you are watching her shrinking in front of you, becoming depressed and vulnerable or seeing her reactions to the chemo, radiation, or medical visits, it can create so much stress and fear that you avoid dealing with her. That friend's vulnerability reminds you of your own.

You are more ready to deal with the guilt of avoidance than walk with your friend through this minefield of anxiety and stress.

The good news is there are many ways you can be supportive. If you can't bring yourself to go with her to the doctor, or the hospital, you can do other things, such as: Offer to watch her children so she can rest; Go shopping with her – or go for her; Take her out to a movie; Explain that you are not abandoning her, but the situation is bringing up a lot of stress in you, and this is the best you can do for now;

Ask her how she is and don't accept "fine" as a real answer;

Tell her you are so sorry she has to go through this; Make her supper, so she doesn't have to cook; Take her out for a walk; Make phone calls for her. What not to say:

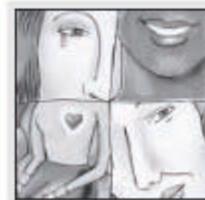
Don't tell her you know of other people surviving this illness. She doesn't care about other people. She may be still in shock or denial;

Don't tell her to be positive. She will think you are minimizing her situation;

Don't tell her it will be fine. You don't know that and neither does she;

Don't tell her she has to be strong. She is not feeling strong right now; she feels terrified.

For people facing these challenges, it's not just about the right doctor, physiotherapist or treatments, it's also dealing with the emotional fallout. They are feeling overwhelmed, lost, scared, exhausted and depressed. They might say they're fine because they know or feel that is what you want to hear.



Those who need help might be embarrassed or afraid to ask you for it in case you can't handle it. This is when you need to rise to the occasion and be there. That's the true meaning of friendship and family. Rhonda Rabow is a psychotherapist. Details: [helphelperhonda.ca](http://helphelperhonda.ca), [info@rhondarabow.com](mailto:info@rhondarabow.com)