

How to 'be there'



Have you ever been in a situation where a friend's opening up to you about something their struggling with and that awkward 'I don't know how to be' feeling spreads over you like an uncomfortable wave? Or, you've worked really hard to help with a problem, giving advice and sharing wisdom, but they've not responded how you thought they would? If this sounds familiar, keep reading; this is your one-stop-shop to master the art of 'being there'.

Step 1 - Get comfortable

Offering to sit with a drink or go for a walk together, so you can really pay attention, will put your friend at ease. If the location isn't right for what might end up being an emotional conversation, or you're in the middle of something that has to be a priority, suggest and agree upon an alternative time; a phone call that evening or lunch the next day, then stick to it. Reliability is key!

Step 2 - Body language

Did you know, up to 93% of how we communicate with each other is non-verbal? This means that the majority of how we understand each other is through our body language and the tone of our voice. Little but important things like turning off or putting away electronic distractions, making eye contact, speaking softly and calmly, nodding and making those 'I hear you' noises - "umm", "uhuh", "right", "yeah", will show your friend that you're really paying attention to what they're saying.

Step 3 - Listen

Sounds easy, right? But listening is harder than you think. Really listening when someone is opening up to you is very different to listening when having a conversation. When we listen to 'be there' it's vital that we don't interrupt and we don't over talk; we allow our friend the space to say all they need to, while we occasionally ask questions to help our understanding and their process.

Step 4 - Ask what they'd like from you

There are usually two reasons someone comes to talk to you about something they're going through. Yes, they're wanting help but we need to work out what kind of help they're after; advice or a safe space to process. Luckily, there's a simple way to work out which one your friend wants - ask! "What would you like from me right now? Advice, or someone to vent to?" There's nothing worse than someone giving you unwanted advice, am I right? Don't be that person.

Step 5 - Reassure: don't rescue

It's unlikely that your friend needs you to fix their problem or rescue them from the situation they're coming to you about. What's more useful is if you help them to feel empowered and strong enough to take the steps they need to help themselves. You can do this by validating their feelings - "It's understandable that you feel this way", "that sounds really challenging". Doing this will mean that if your friend were ever to find themselves in a similar situation, they're more likely to have the experience, wisdom and confidence to tackle the problem and not feel as negatively as they did originally.

Step 6 - Check-in

Sharing emotional stuff can be exhausting for both of you and can open us up to uncomfortable feelings. Check-in with your friend to see how they're doing after your talk and again, reassure them that they did the right thing by sharing their load.

Being the 'go-to' friend can take its toll, so it's important that you check-in with yourself and think about how you manage your own mental health, while supporting others. Do you have the 'me v them' balance right? Do you need to talk to someone too?

You're now a listening expert!

and a better friend