

How to support a loved one who suffers from chronic pain

Alana Saltz | Updated May 25, 2016 @ 4:47 pm



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Every morning, I wake up to an ache in my neck and sharp pain in my back. As the day goes on, I battle frequent headaches, stomachaches, and fatigue. This chronic pain, which has been given many diagnoses over the years, takes a great deal of perseverance and determination to overcome. Finding the right kind of employment has been a constant struggle with my need to visit doctors, take breaks, and spend time on self-care. I sometimes find myself unable to go to parties and events, opting to take medication and rest instead.

But one of the most challenging aspects of suffering from chronic pain is the lack of understanding I've encountered. Chronic pain is a complicated and often misunderstood issue, especially when it's difficult to get a single, clear diagnosis to back it up. Even people with the best intentions find themselves struggling to say or do the right thing, unsure whether they should encourage me to do more and push myself harder or just be there for me and try to sympathize with what's going on.

Here are guidelines to help others provide the best support possible in case you have a loved one in your life who's suffering from chronic pain:

Don't:

Challenge the pain. Chronic pain doesn't always have an obvious cause or diagnosis. Questioning the pain that someone feels or calling it irrational or made up doesn't make it get better or go away. It only makes us feel like there's something wrong with us that we have no ability to fix. That hopelessness, which many of us fight on a daily basis anyway, can lead to feelings of depression, anxiety, and isolation.

Tell someone, "But you look healthy." For many people suffering from chronic pain, appearance has nothing to do with what's going on inside. Someone might look and seem functional, but inside they're dealing with aches, muscle tension, digestive trouble, or a myriad of other issues that can be debilitating enough to cause them to take medication, miss out on activities, and need lots of rest.

Play doctor. It's easy to get caught up in the barrage of information available on the diagnoses given to those suffering from chronic pain. But chronic pain doesn't always fit neatly into a particular criteria or respond to specific treatments. Receiving an accurate diagnosis can take years, if not decades, and there's still so much the medical community doesn't understand. Pay attention to what your loved one is feeling and what their doctors recommend instead of taking the research upon yourself.

Push too hard. If someone suffering from chronic pain feels unable to do something — whether it's going to a party, meeting up with friends, embarking on a trip, or even working full-time — telling them to stick it out, buck up, or just get over it will not be effective. Most of us have had these issues for years and understand our limitations better than anyone else. Providing gentle encouragement and maintaining flexibility is the best way to help chronic pain sufferers take comfortable and safe steps forward.

Do:

Be supportive. Someone suffering from chronic pain will need extra love, attention, and assurance. Patience and an empathetic nature are key to navigating the ups and downs and limitations that come with a loved one's chronic pain issues. Sometimes pain can cause us to be irritable and agitated, but know that (most of the time), it's nothing personal.

Be understanding. If your loved one's chronic pain prevents them from going on an outing or completing a task or chore, don't give them a hard time about it. Avoid telling them that they should be doing more or trying harder, and never accuse them of being lazy or making excuses. They understand their body. They know what's right for them and what's best for their pain.

Help them out. If your loved one is in pain and you can help out by running an errand, driving them to an appointment, making a meal, doing the dishes, or even just bringing them medicine or an ice pack, be sure to offer whenever possible. Your help will be greatly appreciated.

And, most importantly:

Trust your loved one's experience. Even if it's hard for you to relate to them personally, believe your loved one when they say they're in pain. Just saying the words, "I believe you" can help combat the anxiety and insecurity many of us feel around having these mysterious ailments that affect us so strongly yet are written off by so many. Be that advocate in their life. Be the one who trusts them and believes what they're going through.