Showing Up

How to Be There For Yourself and Your Friends

Adapted from "*The Art of Showing Up: How To Be There For Yourself And Your People"* by Rachel Wilkerson Miller

If you are tired, if you're stressed or if you aren't getting your basic needs met, you're not going to be able to show up for other people. And, when you do, it will be from a place of resentment and exhaustion that doesn't feel good for you or for them. So, begin by knowing that, and by taking care of yourself when you are helping someone else.

Begin by Being a Good Listener

To begin with, remember that your focus needs to be on your friend. You should be listening more than talking. It's really hard to listen without jumping in to share your own experiences. And usually, doing that is coming from a good place—you're trying to let them know that you understand—and sometimes that can be welcome. A friend may respond, "I'm so glad to hear you say this, too. Now I feel less alone." Keep in mind, though, that sometimes if you don't listen, it will silence your friend. They feel like, "OK, well, I was trying to talk to you about my breakup. And you just started talking about your dating problems…That didn't feel good."

Listen to Understand, Not to Respond

Listen closely to what they're saying. It's okay to ask questions to make sure you understand: "You're really hurt because he didn't even listen to you..." Try to identify the **facts** (he didn't even **listen**) and the feelings (the person feels hurt).

When In Doubt, Ask.

Sometimes we're afraid to ask because we think the other person will expect us to have the answers and we don't. Think back on when a friend asked you what you needed. Did you feel cared about?

Ask: "What's the best way I can support you right now" or, "Do you want to just vent and not be judged?"

Just ask, "How are you feeling about it?" or "What's your thoughts right now? What do you think you're going to do?" Gently ask about their feelings if they are sort of circling around and you think that it would be helpful for them to just say what it is or if you need to know what they're feeling because you're not sure what to say next.

It’s Okay to Just Say “I’m Sorry.”

If words can’t fix what’s wrong, it’s okay to just say “I’m sorry.” None of us can come up with the perfect response every time, nor do we need to. Sometimes there isn't a perfect response that is going to actually make people feel better. What you want to do is communicate, to let the person know that you care and that they’re not alone:

- This sucks. And I'm so sorry it's happening to you.
- Like, you don’t deserve this.
- You deserve better.

To hear these words when you’re hurting validates that the pain is real. It helps a person heal to know that it’s okay to feel what they’re feeling.

Don't Do the Cliche

Please, don't say, “Everything happens for a reason.” Allow the person to just feel what they’re feeling. Maybe one day they can heal enough to look back and see that it did happen for a reason, but right now, just let them feel.

Don’t Do Statistics

Avoid comments like “You know that 50% of marriages end in divorce.” This won’t be helpful to somebody who just found out about a divorce. Lean away from clichés; just say what's in your heart and really mean it and remember that just because it happens to a lot of people, doesn't mean it's any less devastating for the person experiencing it.

Be Careful if You Talk About Yourself

Another way that people try to comfort someone else might be by saying “I've gone through something similar” and then changing the subject to an anecdote from their own life.

Proceed with caution. If the person is feeling really alone or really ashamed, hearing that somebody they care about has gone through something similar can be validating and really affirming. The problem comes when, suddenly, the conversation is now about you and what happened to you.

What you might say is, “I went through something really similar a few years ago. It was really tough for me. If you ever want to talk about it -- or if you ever want to hear about that experience -- I'm more than happy to talk to you about it.” By saying it this way, you’re putting the control in their hands...

Give Control—Don’t Take It

Sometimes when we experience something outside of our control, it helps to give a person a tiny bit of control of “we can talk about this when you want to talk about it.” It lets the person know that they are not alone, but that you’re not going to bore them with the story of how your pet died, or your relationship breakup, or your failed class.

Are Your Responses Effective?

Ordering, Directing, and Commanding

Takes away the other person's responsibility and power.
Example: "Text them right now and say ..."

Warning, Threatening, Promising

Creates unnecessary fear and anxiety. Don't promise things that may not actually happen.
Example: "Once you get out of this situation, things will be better for you."
Example: "Once you leave that relationship, you will feel better."

Moralizing, Preaching, Should and Ought

Takes away the person's power, makes him/her feel irresponsible.
Example: "You really should…"

Advising & Giving Solutions

Takes away the person's ability to find alternatives best to fit his/her needs.
Example: "Tell him that …"

Teaching, Lecturing, Giving Logical Arguments

Creates boredom and defensiveness. Your friend may not feel that you are listening.
Example: "You are just doing what everyone else has already tried…"

Judging, Criticizing, Disagreeing, Blaming

Demoralizes the other person and shows non-acceptance.
Example: "You did WHAT?" or "You're not really going to say that are you?"

Name Calling, Labeling, Stereotyping

Takes away the person's uniqueness, makes them feel like a statistic.
Example: "All depressed people act that way."

Interpreting, Analyzing, Diagnosing

This is a job for counselors and psychiatrists 😉
Example: "Your mother did that because you are…"

Reassuring

Denies the person's reality
Example: "Oh, don't worry about it. You'll be just fine."

Probing and Interrogating

Satisfies your curiosity, but does not meet the needs of the other person.
Example: "Tell me more about that. Tell me everything!"

Don’t Be A Foister or Fretter

When somebody is going through a difficult time, a lot of us naturally tend to fall into one of two behavioral patterns:

- A Foister is the someone who's just sort of like, I need to help you. I'm going to push my advice. I'm going to push my solution. I'm going to fix this for you. I'm going to foist this on you. And I'm going to be upset with you if you don't do it.

- A Fretter is the person who must take care of somebody else kind of to serve their own needs. They’re really worried. They want to be the friend who's good. They want to do things right. And so they kind of are the one who's constantly saying, like, “Is this enough? Is this good? Do you want me to do something else? I can get something else for you?” They let their own anxiety take over -- they fret in a way that forces the person in need to soothe them.

Both of these are rooted in trying to do the right thing. They're behaviors that people who care do, so there's no shame in doing it. Just…keep those things in check.

Not One-and-Done

Grief is a process. People can be doing really well and then things can fall apart. Anniversaries, birthdays, holidays, and other reminder dates can be really difficult.

Remembering “Oh, my friend feels really bad as Christmas approaches because their mom got sick at Christmas last year.” And then, set a reminder to text a friend and ask “Hey, what's up? How have you been?” You don't have do a serious check-in every day, or even once a week, but just stay in touch—keep the line open—maybe ask if they have plans for Christmas? Can the two of you take a walk together and just talk? It will mean a lot to your friend to know that you are thinking about them on those days.

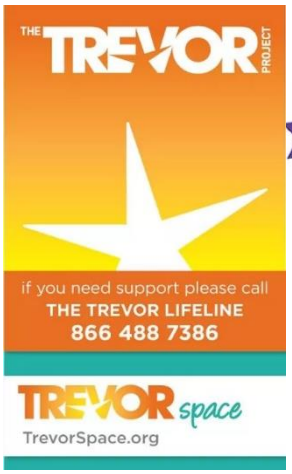
The #1 Thing to Remember

This time is not normal. Follow your friend's lead, first and foremost - if they want you to help things feel more normal, you should totally do that. But, if you're getting the sense that they are really overwhelmed and they're not doing well and they need you to be there with them so that they’re not so alone, just be there with them. It’s okay to say things like

- This sucks
- I'm here with you
- I understand that you're sad and you're going to be sad for a while
- You don’t have to put on a face for me; I get where you’re at and it’s okay.

It's really powerful to know that you don't have to put on a face for a friend, that you can just say you’re still feeling bad when a friend asks...and it helps to know that a friend really cares.

And remember, if you’re worried that your friend may be in danger, get help!

Validating Feelings

Hurt	Angry	Scared	Guilty	Generic
That must have been very hard for you.	I'd be angry, too!	That must have been so hard for you.	Getting help is a brave thing to do.	You are very strong to talk about this.
It's okay to be sad.	Wow! I think it's okay to be steaming mad!	It sounds like you were really scared.	Our background and circumstances have influenced who we are, but we are responsible for who we become.	Getting help is a brave thing to do; I'm glad you are talking about it.
It's okay to cry.	You have every right to be angry	I'm glad you're safe.	It's painful sometimes when we realize things about ourselves that we want to change. You're very strong to want to work on this.	You've done a good job of thinking things through.
I'm sorry this happened to you.	You have every right to be angry, but I'm feeling like you're taking your anger out on me.	You did a great job at keeping yourself safe. I'm glad you are okay.	It sounds like you really care about school and you are really trying hard.	It sounds like you are making some healthy choices.
You might have good days and bad days, but just because you have a bad day, doesn't mean that all is lost.	It sounds like you're trying to think things through so that you can express your feelings in a healthy way.	Sometimes when we know and understand more about a problem, our fear becomes less and we can face the problem without being so afraid.	Sometimes it's easier to forgive someone else than it is to forgive ourselves. I'm glad you told me about this.	Sometimes it's scary to make decisions. It sounds like you're really thinking things through.
I think I'd have just started crying right there. Ouch—that must have hurt!	You don't deserve to be treated that way.	When we have help, we don't have to be as afraid.	The mistakes of your past can have no power over you if you are willing to learn and to change.	What helps you feel better about things?