

If you are wanting to support someone who you think is struggling in silence, or maybe they gave you this to read, here's some suggestions. Just as we learn all about supporting a physical illness when a loved one becomes ill we can do the same for emotional pain so please keep learning, this isn't everything but it's a start..

Please know people are desperate to share their inner pain, their fears, to share what is really going on for them, but if they are struggling they may fear they will be judged (*don't be silly, you just need to..*), it will be made worse (*you panic, get upset or tell others, make fun of them etc*) or that they will be treated differently once they do (*tip toe around, pity, smoother*); that would be like them showing you a physical wound & you slapping it or throwing salt in it, please be careful. In my experience if you create a safe space people will always open up, but that safe space has to start long before they speak & in every contact eg If you are telling them to change, making fun of them, dismissing their concerns or deciding for them – less trust. But apologising is a great way to start. People will test with little things to see how you handle it, cos when people hit rock bottom there has been a slow descent first. This isn't about perfect, but about more safety than not – when you are in pain someone who is 52% safe is a blessing (& I know this can be hard when you are stressed or busy but if it was a physical issue you would do what is needed)

Emotional pain is rarely rational or about what is happening right now - a bit like a phobic response when the danger is not there. You can parallel it to a physical wound in that the pain now is due to someone leaning on an unhealed old wound – if the wound wasn't there they would respond different, & telling them it's not that bad doesn't help ease the pain.

Be aware of how you are feeling – if your emotions do not match your words they may clam up, eg if you say you understand but inside are frustrated, or if you panic & try to hide it. Think of your emotions as adding to theirs – calm will ease it for them, stress will not.

If you want to open a conversation you can say '*I notice.....are you OK? You don't have to talk me but I am here if you want to, no pressure.*' You could even briefly share any of your experience '*I know I really struggled/was anxious when....*' but don't then say '*I know what it's like/ you should...*'

If they do share, ideas of how to respond:

If they say I am bad, worthless etc, they are talking from inside the pain, telling someone they are wrong in how they think is not a safe place to start but you

can say *'I don't see that but I get it is how you feel that matters....I will listen & try to understand if you want to tell me more'* (but no pressure)

Or *'I am sorry you are in pain, how can I help/ what would be supportive for you?.'*

People sometimes find it easier to talk when you are not staring at them, but alongside, which is why people can open up when in a car or on a walk.

Listening without judging, showing you still love them even if they never change can be the most healing thing that can be done, and often enough. Sitting with them when they are in pain is everything, and also hard to do without trying to fix them, or minimise or tell them they have a lot going for them – when you are in pain that feels a judgement, unless they ask for suggestions when it can be helpful to remind & check if it helps.

You can say I don't know how to best help you but I want to learn. It could be when they are in less pain you discuss what they need when they sink (listen, go for a walk, be there in silence, distract, specific things etc)

Unless their life is in danger let them decide what next – they may want help seeing a GP (ask their receptionist who is the best GP for that, not all get it). or ask if they want you to check in & ask how they are, & how often. It may be specific situations they struggle with, eg let them have an out at family parties or ask how to support.

Even if they say they see no point in living, stay calm. Say it must be hard to feel that & part of you may also want to live, still have hope. Listen to their fears about getting help, stay calm & say you will support them to get the help they need to heal (which may start with a book, or an anonymous helpline). Of course, you can ask if they have made plans to end their life but unless they have do not panic as they will likely not tell you again and a big prevention is them being able to be honest with you. I know this is hard but trust me – its harder for them so get advice if you need and ask them how to best support them, what the pain needs. You can say you are concerned but don't make it about you. People get to that point cos the pain is either overwhelming or they have numbed it, focus on easing that.

And you know, being this way with everyone causes no harm but just may well save a life. Keep learning.

And thank-you for caring enough to read this.