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PROBLEM? RELAX. YOU'VE GOT THIS!

A tongue-in-cheek guide series ;)

I Don't Know How to Be There When Someone Is Struggling

How to Listen, Offer Practical Help, and Support Someone You Care About Without Forcing a Bright Side



We've got a problem. But relax. It can be solved and we'll even have something to laugh about.

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INTRO

Good intentions can create a surprising amount of mess

Someone you like, love, or at least do not want to leave alone with a catastrophe tells you that things are bad. A breakup. An illness. Trouble at work. The death of someone close. Money. Loneliness. Exhaustion. Or simply the kind of day when a person looks at a cup of tea and feels that even the cup is handling life better than they are.

And then you arrive. Full of good intentions. Which means you are armed with an impressive collection of sentences that sound sensible for approximately three seconds.

"You have to think positive." "Everything happens for a reason." "Don't worry."

"Other people have it worse." "At least..." That last phrase should probably come with its own warning siren.

"At least you have your health." "At least you found out quickly." "At least you don't have children."

"At least she lived a long life." "At least you have a job."

Most of the time, we do not say these things because we are empathy-free robots. We say them because we desperately want to do something and have absolutely no idea what. Someone else's pain is uncomfortable. Not because we are bad people, but because it is difficult to stand next to something we cannot repair.

In many ordinary situations, life follows a reassuringly simple structure: problem, solution, relief. Broken faucet? Plumber. Hungry? Sandwich. No internet? Restart the router, followed by the traditional ritual of insulting your service

provider. So when someone close to us says, "I can't cope anymore," the brain automatically starts looking for the REPAIR button.

The problem is that a person is not a router. They do not always need a restart. Sometimes they need someone willing to sit beside the blinking red light for a while without pretending it is not there.

That is what this book is about.

It will not teach you the perfect words, because perfect words usually do not exist. You will not find a magical sentence that makes someone going through a divorce wipe away a tear, look toward the horizon, and say, "Max was right. I'm fine now." We are also not going to turn you into an amateur psychologist, therapist, doctor, or emergency responder for every person who ever texts you after 10 p.m.

We are going to learn something more useful. How to be there.

How to listen without spending the whole conversation preparing your own response. How to ask instead of guessing. How to offer help that does not end with, "Let me know if you need anything," which is basically the polite equivalent of handing someone an application form during the worst week of their life.

We will also talk about boundaries. Supporting another person does not mean taking responsibility for their life, emotions, decisions, refrigerator, and cat. You can stay close without turning yourself into a twenty-four-hour crisis center with free parking.

But the most important idea is simpler than it sounds. When someone feels terrible, you do not have to make them feel good immediately. Really.

This is not an exam in cheering people up. You do not receive extra points for removing sadness quickly. Your job is not necessarily to move another person from "everything is awful" to "life is beautiful." Sometimes a huge success is moving them from "I am alone in this" to "someone is sitting here with me."

And that is a lot. Sometimes it is a very great deal.

Chapter 1 - You Do Not Have to Fix a Person

The fixer reflex

When someone tells us about a problem, it is incredibly easy to confuse support with problem-solving. We hear, "I can't take this job anymore," and immediately answer, "Then quit." We hear, "I had a huge argument with my sister," and activate our private family mediation department. We hear, "I'm completely exhausted," and start presenting a plan involving sleep, supplements, exercise, and reduced screen time as if we were holding a press conference for the National Institute of Getting Your Life Together.

The problem is that someone talking about something painful is not always asking for a solution. Sometimes they want to name what they are experiencing. Sometimes they want to be heard. Sometimes they already know every possible solution and simply do not have the energy to act on any of them.

Imagine someone saying: "The breakup has been really hard on me for the past few weeks." And you answer: "You need to start going out and meeting people." Logical?

Of course. Helpful? Not necessarily.

It is a little like telling someone with the flu: "You should be healthier." Technically flawless. Practically not very useful.

The first step toward supporting people better is accepting a slightly uncomfortable fact: not every problem you hear about has been assigned to you as a task. Sometimes it is simply information. "This is what my life looks like right now."

And the best response may be: "That sounds really hard." Not impressive? That is fine.

Support rarely requires a PowerPoint presentation.

Why we want to do something so badly

The urge to fix other people's problems does not come entirely from kindness. It also comes from our own discomfort. When a friend is suffering, a partner is crying, or a family member says they cannot cope, tension appears, and we do not always know what to do with it.

Solutions give us a sense of control. "Call them." "Do this."

"Tell him that." "See this doctor." "Join a gym."

"Go away for the weekend."

Every piece of advice creates a small illusion that the situation is predictable again. There is point A, point B, and a neat arrow between them. Emotional life, unfortunately, rarely resembles the instruction manual for assembling a bookcase.

Someone may know exactly what they should do and still not be ready to do it. They may know they should leave a toxic relationship but fear being alone. They may know they should ask for help but feel ashamed. They may know their job is destroying them but also have a mortgage, children, and very little interest in the romantic fantasy of "I'll quit everything and open a café in Portugal."

Good support begins where the belief that we understand the whole situation ends.

Three questions instead of ten pieces of advice

When someone tells you about something difficult, you can use a simple set of questions. The first is: "Do you want me to

just listen, or do you want us to think together about what you could do?" That one sentence can prevent half an hour of mutual frustration.

The person may say: "Just listen." Excellent. You have just received the operating instructions.

They may also say: "I don't know." Then you can answer: "Okay. I'll just listen for now."

The second question is: "What is the hardest part of all this for you right now?"

This works better than guessing. You may assume that losing a job is mainly about money, while for the other person the worst part is humiliation. You may assume someone going through a divorce is afraid of being alone, while their biggest concern is actually everyday contact with their children.

The third question is: "Is there anything specific that could make today a little easier?" Notice the word "little." We are not asking: "How can I fix your life?"

We are not asking: "What do I need to do so you stop hurting?" We are asking whether we can remove one small weight from the pile. Sometimes the answer will be wonderfully ordinary: "Could you pick the kids up from school?"

"Could you call tomorrow?" "Could you come to the doctor with me?" "Could you bring me something to eat?"

This is where support stops being a theory.

Listening is not waiting for your turn

Many conversations work like tennis. One person talks, the other waits for their turn, returns the story with a story of their

own, and the ball goes back across the net. "I'm terrified about the surgery."

"I had surgery once too! Let me tell you..." Forty-five minutes later, the person who was supposed to receive support now knows the complete history of your knee from 2018.

Sharing your own experience is not automatically wrong. It can create connection and help someone feel less alone. But it is worth making sure your story does not take over the entire conversation.

A useful rule is: stay with the other person's story first. You can say: "I understand why you're scared." "What worries you most?"

"Do you want to talk about it some more?" Only later, if it seems helpful, you might add: "I went through something similar once. If you want, I can tell you what helped me."

Notice the difference. You are not driving a bulldozer into the conversation with your experience. You are knocking on the door.

Do not try to take away someone's right to feel what they feel

One of the most natural responses to another person's sadness is: "Don't cry." We often say it with affection. But the hidden message may sound like: "I would prefer you to stop feeling what you are feeling."

The same thing happens with: "Don't get upset." "Don't think about it." "Don't let it bother you."

If you have ever successfully stopped thinking about something because somebody told you "don't think about it,"

you should probably volunteer for scientific research. Instead of trying to switch the emotion off, we can acknowledge it. "You have every right to be angry."

"No wonder that hurts." "That's a lot for one person." "I can see how hard this is for you."

Acknowledging an emotion does not mean agreeing with every conclusion the other person reaches. You can recognize someone's pain without confirming that every interpretation they have is objectively true. If someone says: "I'm a complete failure."

You do not have to answer: "Yes, absolutely." But you also do not have to shout immediately: "What are you talking about? You're amazing!"

You can say: "It sounds like that's really how you feel about yourself right now." That opens the conversation. It does not shut it down.

The "at least" trap

"At least" is one of the most effective tools available for accidentally invalidating someone's feelings. "I got fired." "At least you'll get severance."

"I had a miscarriage." "At least you know you can get pregnant." "We broke up."

"At least you weren't married." "My dog died." "At least he lived a long life."

The intention is usually good. We are trying to find the part of reality that hurts less. But to the person who is suffering, the message can sound like: "You should not feel this bad because things could have been worse."