



tips to

## be kind to a loved one

with a chronic illness

While every person with a chronic illness will have their own experiences and preferences, these tips can serve as a guide to being intentional in how you relate to them. Each one is developed from the personal experiences of people with a variety of chronic illnesses. Why not talk through these tips with your friend or loved one and ask them where they agree or disagree? Sometimes the hardest thing is not knowing what to say. Let these tips help you start the conversation.

### **DON'T offer unsolicited medical or lifestyle advice**

Most people with chronic illnesses, especially those who have been living with that illness for a long time, have consulted multiple medical professionals. Many also do extensive research on their own.

It can be both time-consuming and depressing to be bombarded by health advice from people who do not have expert or inside knowledge of their illness, and have to explain why the “miracle cure,” new diet, or “alternative” remedy will not work for them. It can also be dangerous to try to persuade a person with a serious illness that the medications prescribed by their doctors are worthless or even contributing to their illness.

**INSTEAD:** Ask your friend if they want you to forward any articles or news you might see about new treatments or helpful tips for living with their illness. If they say no, then don't.

### **DO offer concrete help**

A phrase like, “Let me know if I can do anything to help” reflects a kind spirit, but in reality it puts too much of the burden on the other person. Instead, try saying things like:

“I'm running to the store this afternoon. Can I pick anything up for you?”

“How about if I come over for a few hours today so we can have coffee and chat? While I'm there, I can do a couple of loads of laundry for you.”

“I'm cooking that chili you like. Can I make a double batch and bring half of it over for you?”

“What's the best way for me to check up on you to see if you need anything?”

“Would it help if I picked up your kids from school once a week?”

“Do you need a ride to your doctor's appointment?”

If you belong to a book club, social group, or faith group, consider organizing regular help with your friend's full participation in determining what would be most helpful.

Sometimes the best help you can offer is simply to be present. Watch TV together (some streaming platforms now offer features that let you watch together from separate locations), go for a drive, or get on the phone and just talk about everything and anything.

## **DON'T say things that minimize their illness or suggest it's all in their head**

Telling someone with a chronic illness, “You don’t *look* sick” may come from a desire to encourage, but can be taken as implying they’re not really sick. Other phrases that might be unintentionally hurtful include:

- “You are too young to be so sick.”
- “Everyone gets tired.”
- “Everyone hurts sometimes.”
- “It must be nice to not have to work.”
- “You just need to push through the pain.”
- “You just need to think positive.”
- “It’s all in your head.”
- “You need to get out more.”
- “You take too many medications.”
- “It could be worse.”
- “At least it isn’t fatal/terminal/deadly.”
- “You’re just too sensitive.”
- “Wait until you’re old; then you’ll really know what pain is.”

Words like these can stay with your friend or loved one for a long time.

**INSTEAD:** Be kind with your words. If you ask, “How are you doing today?” be clear that you really care about the answer. Ask, “Will you help me understand what it’s like to deal with your illness?” Listen without judgment and sympathize without trying to fix. Most of all, affirm your friend or loved one by telling them what you value about them.

## **DO recognize that grief, depression, and shame are all frequently a part of chronic illness**

Chronic illness can steal so many things—not just health, but also hopes, dreams, ambitions, hobbies, social interaction, and simple daily routines. On days when they’re unable to perform ordinary tasks such as cooking a meal or emptying the dishwasher, people with chronic illnesses may feel useless and helpless.

Side effects of pain or medication can rob them of things they used to be proud of—such as short-term memory, a sense of direction, or the ability to concentrate.

Over time, many come to feel that they are a burden on their friends and family. They may resist asking for help, even when it’s desperately needed, due to feelings of guilt.

Questions such as, “Are you getting better?” can increase guilt and depression. Chronic illnesses are just that—chronic. A more helpful question is, “Is this a good day or a bad day?”

Seek ways to give your friend or loved one their dignity. Find things to laugh about together. Be patient with lapses, and make the help you give seem natural and easy. It may also help to simply come right out and say, “You are not a burden to me. You give me so much joy in my life, and I am glad to be here for you.”

### **DON'T be offended if you don't hear from your chronically ill friend regularly**

Sometimes the combined effects of illness, pain, and medication make reaching out exhausting for people with chronic illnesses. Sometimes those effects even make it difficult to remember when they last did reach out. And on bad days, they may be grumpy or out of sorts if they do get in touch.

None of these things means they don't want to be a part of your life. Please don't stop reaching out.

**INSTEAD:** Call. Ask if it's a good time. If it's not, call again another time. Ask how they're doing, and be sure to tell them what's new with you. Ask for advice with a problem. If you don't know what to say, then say, “I don't know what to say. But I want you to know that I'm here.” Show clearly that you want them in your life.

### **DO invite your chronically ill friend to gatherings and events (post-COVID) even when you think they are unlikely to be able to attend**

Holiday parties, picnics, sporting events ... many activities are hard for people with chronic illnesses to attend. But not being invited at all can hurt. Keep on offering the invitations. You may also want to outline the event for your friend or loved one and ask if there are ways it could be made easier for them to attend.

Please don't be offended if your friend accepts the invitation but has to cancel at the last minute. Chronic illnesses can be unpredictable day to day and even hour to hour. If you're unhappy that they're having to bow out, they're even more unhappy about it.

Another idea is to suggest a night in at their place, with all the arrangements taken care of by you.

## **In conclusion**

Life with a chronic illness is a daily challenge. But by being mindful about our words and actions, we can help lift that burden a little so that our friends and loved ones know how much we value them. Your relationship may deepen, and they may teach you some practical lessons in persevering in hard times. And simply being committed to kindness can change the way you look at the world!