DO YOU KNOW HOW TO BE HELPFUL?

If you’ve ever been in a crisis, you’ve likely heard these words, “What can I do to help?”

They’re well-intentioned. People around you are reaching out to make you feel loved and supported in your time of need, but there’s a whole host of other things you’re feeling right now. You’re feeling overwhelmed, exhausted, and adrift . You probably can’t imagine organizing anything — even if it would simplify your life overall. So, the next time you see someone through a difficult moment, try not to utter those 6 common words, “What can I do to help?”

Instead, here are some tips about how to do helpful things without putting the burden for help on those who need it most.

Organize meals: Whether you decide to use a meal delivery service, or are organizing meals with friends and family, do these first:

Request a list of food allergies and preferences

Provide a complete meal that only requires reheating

Keep food safety in mind (i.e., use ice packs or put hot food into insulated bags)

Always share reheating instructions

Have a designated drop-off time so they know when to expect the meal(s)

Grocery shopping:

Don’t expect your family member or friend to call you when they need groceries. The next time you’re going to the grocery store, text the person in need and ask them for a couple of items off their grocery list. They may be too humble to allow someone to pick up their entire grocery bill, but just milk, eggs, or diapers? Having these items may help tide them over and push out their next grocery trip, so they’re not stressed about trekking out with everything else they have going on. Also, have a few items off the top of your head to suggest if they sound resistant, and remind them that you’re on your way to the store for yourself already. It’s really no trouble at all.

Go for a walk:

During difficult times, it can be hard to know how to react. Some people tend to hunker down at home, and this results in less sunlight, fresh air, and vitamin D. Offer to go for a walk with them, their baby, their dog, or anyone else who wants to come along. It can be a great way to get out, get some exercise, change their scenery, and help them feel better in a small way.

Make time to visit, but set a limit:

Visiting someone during a crisis, trauma, or grief can be difficult. Some people love company, while others cocoon themselves to preserve their mental energy. If you’re asked to visit, make sure you have a time limit so everyone knows exactly how long you’re planning to stay. It’s draining to feel like you need to clean your home or entertain someone when you’re not feeling well, so propose a quick 10-minute visit on the porch, or let them know that you won’t stay over 20 minutes, and keep to your plan unless they ask you to stay longer. A great way to make a quick visit is by letting them know you’ll stop by before your appointment or school pick-up time. This way, your time with them won’t extend beyond a certain point. You can always make plans to come back!

Do a load of laundry:

Laundry is a never-ending chore. For someone who is ill, grieving, or recovering, laundry is just like food…you know they’ll need help. Be the friend or family member who offers to come over and do a couple of loads on their behalf. Stay through the entire process (including folding and putting away if they’re comfortable with that!) and chat or watch movies with them.

Final thoughts:

Just because someone brushes off your support initially doesn’t mean they wouldn’t benefit from it or value it a little later. Much of this information comes from my personal experiences and the meal train website. Come up with your own ideas. Even in the closest relationships, being asked “What can I do to help?” may be exhausting and not really helpful.

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