How You Can Help Someone With Migraine

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How to Help Someone With Migraine

You don't know what it is like. You don't have the aching or the throbbing. You have not experienced the nausea or the visual disturbances. Really, you barely ever even get headaches so understanding what your loved one is going through with their migraines is a challenging task.

Naturally, you want to help. You want to do what is best for them, but you're not quite sure what to do. Sometimes you do something and your loved one is very appreciative and grateful. Other times, you can do the exact same thing and get a completely different result. You're left scratching your head, powerless and frustrated. Your loved one is left with continued pain that you cannot alleviate.

The question is: what can you do to help? The truth is that there are many things that benefit people with migraines. At times though, the way you delivery the remedy can be just as helpful as the remedy itself.

Empathy versus Sympathy

When therapists go to school to become therapists, a vital lesson they learn is the difference between empathy and sympathy. If you love and support someone with migraines, knowing the difference will help you as well. Sympathy is a good place to begin since most people are familiar with this one. When you look up sympathy's definition, you will see many variations, but the one that applies here is "support in the form of shared feelings." This means that when someone feels something you sympathize with them by feeling the same way they do. When someone is happy, you feel their happiness. When someone is sad, you feel their sadness. This connection allows you to understand them better. At the same time, they will feel validated that someone is acknowledging their feelings.

Empathy shares similar themes with a slight variation. Rather than feeling what someone else is feeling, empathy means that you understand what they are feeling and why they are feeling that way. Empathy is the idea of walking a mile in their shoes. It is knowing and accepting the other's point of view.

Which one do you think therapists are trained in? Which one do you think you should employ when dealing with your loved one's migraines? The good news is that empathy is the answer to both questions. The main reason for this is that sympathy is only useful in small doses. If there is a death or sickness that someone you know is dealing with, being sympathetic is reasonable and expected. This can last for a few hours or a few days and you can return to normal functioning.

One problem with sympathy is that it is incredibly draining on you as the sympathetic person. Prolonged use of sympathy will always lead to burnout. In burnout, the caretaker will experience decreased motivation to care for the loved one, increased irritability and higher levels of exhaustion. Burnout is common is professional caretakers and something that should be avoided at all costs. It is very difficult to recover from burnout.

The second problem with sympathy is that it is not as helpful to your loved one as empathy. The reason for this is that the strong emotional connection you have will skew and distort your perceptions and judgments of the situation. Without objectivity and rationality, you will be more likely to behave in ways that are based on immediate gratification rather than long-term benefit of your loved one. This style only creates more problems in the future.

The best way to build and maintain empathy is by monitoring your thoughts, feelings and behaviors while seeking feedback from other trusted sources. If you notice that you are dreading spending time with your loved one with migraines, if other areas of your life are being impacted negatively or if you are feeling more depressed and helpless, you may be headed for burnout. Working to establish solid boundaries will help keep you in an empathic mode. Decide how far you are willing to go, and what lines you are not willing to cross.

Next Page: how to help and how to hurt.

How to Help

Now that you know empathy is the way to go, what should you do with it? The best interventions are simple, consistent and planned well before the next migraine occurs. Want to help your loved one? Here's how:

- **Check in.** Something that helps people with migraines the most is a check in. A check in is the act of calling, texting, stopping by and reaching out online to your loved one. Ask them how they are feeling and what you can do to assist. The check in reassures your loved one that someone is there caring for them. This will diminish feelings of isolation common with migraine sufferers.
- **During the check in process, you can spend some of the interaction talking about prevention.** Work with your loved one on identifying triggers of migraines and ways to avoid these if possible. Surely, not all migraines can be prevented, but work to create a sense of control in your loved one. This will reduce feelings of powerlessness and hopelessness.
- **At times, you loved one's migraines may be completely incapacitating.** Because of this, they will be unable to get food and drink during the process. Additionally, they may have difficulty tending to household tasks and obligations. Being there to walk their dog or make a sandwich for lunch can make the biggest positive impact on their life, and something they will not be able to do for themselves.
- **Check out.** You already know that doing too much, becoming too involved and accepting too much responsibility will lead to sympathizing rather than empathizing. You also know that sympathy leads to burn out. Know when you have given all that you can for that day, week or month and step out. Practicing good self-care will make you better able to successfully care for your loved one in the future. Caring for others is a marathon, not a sprint. Reserving energy for later will make you better down the road.

How to Hurt

Helping someone with migraines is hard work. Unfortunately, hurting someone with migraines is effortless. For this reason, you must gain awareness of traps that other supports fall into so that you can avoid the same mistakes. Here's what not to do:

- **Judge/blame.** These are always poor options as no good comes from judging and blaming others generally. In the case of migraines, blaming and judging the sufferer serves to further victimize the victim and puts too much responsibility on them for their own pain.

- **Focus on migraines.** Your loved one is more than their migraines. If all of your focus is on the pain, your relationship will become one dimensional and unfulfilling to each of you. Some of the best support you can give comes in the form of treating them like a typical person.
- **Encourage negative coping skills.** The list of negative coping skills is long. From overusing pain medication to drinking alcohol excessively, there are many things someone with migraines can do to temporarily improve their state. Negative coping skills are held together by the fact that they end in

worsening symptoms and a poorer overall well-being. The “quick fix” leads to long-term pain.

- **Give up.** When you judge, blame, push people too far and encourage negative coping skills, you add to your own frustration as well as their own. This will damage the relationship. When the relationship is damaged, you will be more likely to give up and walk away. This leaves you without the connection to your loved one and leaves them with one less support. It is a lose/ lose situation.

Conclusion

It is not easy being a person with migraines. It is also not easy being a person working to care for and support someone with migraines. Protecting yourself through the use of empathy instead of sympathy is an important distinction to make. After you are grounded in empathy, you can begin focusing on the ways to help and avoiding the ways to hurt. By doing this, you make migraines less of a pain.