

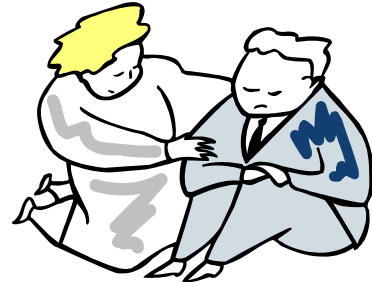


Heights and Hills Volunteer Program

Bringing Friendship & Joy to Brooklyn's Older Adults

When Friendly Visiting requires more than just a smile:

How to handle feelings of sadness, loss, and the holiday blues.



Older adults are survivors with the abundance of wisdom that comes with life experience. We often associate elderhood with positive life changes like retirement or the joys of time with extended family. However, elderhood is often also marked by less positive life changes: loss of a spouse and/or friends, loss of functioning and independence due to medical problems, social isolation, loss or decrease in income, amongst other issues. Any of these situations can bring about feelings of grief and sadness. The holidays can exacerbate these feelings when the pressure is on to take stock, be grateful and experience heightened connections with family and friends.

As a friendly visitor you may encounter your older friend feeling sad or “blue” and it is important to recognize that these feelings are often normal, healthy reactions to difficult circumstances. Be aware of the media hype: *There is **no such thing** as a “perfect” holiday!*

As a volunteer what can you do when your older friend seems sad or blue?

Strategies for being together during difficult emotional times:

Acknowledge the feeling - saying that your friend seems sad won't make them feel worse and it might give them some relief to know that someone *notices* how they feel and *cares* how they feel.

Allow for expression of the feeling - having an opportunity to talk about our feelings may alleviate them and helps people feel less alone.



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Don't feel pressure to delve into the underlying issue – you are a friendly visitor not a professional counselor. It's ok to acknowledge the feeling and just sit and hold space together or hold a hand 😊.

Acknowledge what the sadness brings up for you – sometimes sadness in others can bring about things that have made us sad. Be aware of this possibility in yourself and take time to talk to a friend or our Volunteer Program staff if things come up that are making it hard for you to visit.

Listen without judgement: Judgments are natural part of human behavior but *expressing them is a choice* – be aware and check your judgments at the door! When people do not feel judged, they are more likely to be more comfortable asking for help. Put your own feelings aside and listen respectfully so you are creating a safe space for expressing difficult emotions.

How? It's important to pay special attention to **your own attitudes** and to focus on three key positive attitudes: **acceptance, empathy, and genuineness.**

Acceptance means respecting another person's feelings, personal values, and experiences as valid, *even if they are different from your own or you disagree with them.* Do not judge, criticize, or trivialize what the person says because of your own beliefs. This may mean withholding any and all judgements that you may have made about the person and their circumstances.

Empathy means being able to imagine yourself in the other person's shoes and showing that they are *truly heard and understood by you.* This doesn't mean saying "I know *exactly* how you are feeling" because everyone's experience of even similar situations is very different. It is better to say, "I can imagine what you must be going through," which highlights *understanding.* It is important to remember that **empathy is different from sympathy** which means feeling sorry for or pitying the person.



Genuineness means that what you say and do shows you are accepting of another person. This means you are not holding one set of attitudes while expressing another. Your body language and verbal cues reinforces your *acceptance* of the other person. (i.e., if you tell your friend, you



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accept how they feel, but you have a defensive posture or avoid eye contact, they will know you are not being genuine).

Listening Tips

- Resist the urge to “cure,” “fix” the “problem,” or provide answers/solutions.
- Ask questions that show you are listening & seek clarification on what you are hearing.
- Check your understanding by restating what is being expressed to you.
- Listen not only to what the person says, but *how* it is said, tone of voice and nonverbal cues will give extra clues about feelings.
- Use minimal prompts such as “I see” or “ah” when necessary to keep the conversation going.
- Be patient, even when the person may not be communicating well, is repetitive, or is speaking more slowly and less clearly than usual.
- Don’t be critical, and don’t express your frustration at the person for having challenging feelings.
- Avoid giving unhelpful advice such as “pull yourself together” or “cheer up.”
- Do not interrupt, especially to share your opinions or experiences, give room for the person speaking to be fully heard before you share.

Remember that **pauses** and **silences** are perfectly OK. Silence can be uncomfortable for many people, but some of us may need time to think about what has been said or may be struggling to find the right words. Interrupting the silence may make it difficult for a person to get back on track or may damage the rapport you are building. *Consider whether the silence is awkward, or just awkward for you.*

**THE QUIETER
YOU BECOME,
THE MORE
YOU CAN
HEAR**

Nonverbal Listening Tips

- Maintain comfortable eye contact! Don’t avoid eye contact but do avoid staring. You can do this by maintaining a level of eye contact that seems most comfortable to the person, *considering their cultural background and preferences.*
- Maintain an open body position, no crossed arms over your body (comes off as defensive) and try to refrain from fidgeting as much as possible.
- Do not use overly compassionate looks of concern which may come off as disingenuous.
- Sit down, even if the person is standing, as it seems less “threatening” and provides a calmer environment.



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- It is ideal to sit alongside and angled forward toward the person talking, rather than directly opposite him/her.

Depression vs seasonal & occasional “blues”

Everyone feels down or sad from time to time. These types of episodes will be short term and won't affect a person's ability to enjoy life or affect their health long term. Depression is a clinical illness and should be treated by a professional. As a volunteer, **you are not expected to diagnose or treat depression in your older friend.** But if you notice changes related to the recognized signs of clinical depression or are unsure about changes you are observing you have a responsibility to *bring them to the attention of our Volunteer Program staff.* **Signs of clinical depression are:**

- Loss of interest or pleasure in activities that used to bring pleasure (e.g., a person liked to play checkers, read, and listen to music, now they seem to have no interest in these things)
- Loss of energy, e.g., a significant pronounced shift that is not linked to a medical illness.
- Changes in weight and appetite that are sudden and dramatic.
- Irritability, e.g., a sudden increase that does not seem to fade from week to week.
- Changes in memory or concentration

We are here for you! Talk to the volunteer program staff –if an experience or conversation makes you uncomfortable or you have questions, please get in touch. No question or concern is too small. We are here to listen and to provide you with support!!

Continue your visits & calls – when we are sad or blue, knowing we are not alone is important; **your** visits and calls make all the difference!

