



## MENTAL HEALTH

Asking for help is the first step to getting well

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# NAVIGATING THE MENTAL HEALTH

► If you're trying to help someone going through a mental health crisis, experts say the first step is to make them comfortable with the idea of reaching out for help, writes **Sonali Kokra**

**T**oo much to deal with, too much fragility, too much uncertainty, too much to understand, too much to accommodate, too much to sign up for.

"Too much" may well be the unspoken phrase that lies at the heart of most mental health crises – not just for those living them, but also for those watching them unfold, unsure of what they can or should do to offer support. Unsure if they're equal to the task of helping their loved one.

This is not a rebuke or criticism.

Mental health is a complex maze, and dealing with its challenges can be tricky for several reasons. For starters, the ways in which different people suffering from the same problem experience it could be polar opposites. Depression might make one person fall apart in public, as someone else may feel determined to present the illusion of happiness, and a third might want to isolate themselves from loved ones.

Similarly, we process grief, anxiety and trauma in myriad ways. What follows, then, is that the care, help or support a person may need cannot be a templated response.

The UAE's Ministry of Health and Prevention has, in recent years, doubled down on its efforts to raise awareness about mental health, as well as make help accessible to all. Even so, according to the ministry's website, an estimated 17.7 per cent of the population in the Arab world experiences depression.

This is a worrying statistic, especially when you consider

that many incidences of mental health problems go largely unreported owing to the stigmas still attached. Far too many people deal with it silently, perhaps not even acknowledging to themselves that something is wrong, let alone asking for support from loved ones or seeking professional help.

Dr Annette Schonder, head psychologist at Clinic for Health and Medical Care in Dubai, explains that sometimes people don't ask for help because they think it's normal to feel a certain way and try to manage on their own.

"They might not realise how deeply depressed they are or that their symptoms are considered treatable mental health symptoms. Another reason is the belief that mental health is a family matter and

should not be discussed with anybody on the outside."

Clinical psychologist Dr Elif Celebi, from Thrive Wellbeing Centre, Dubai, also says that in addition to norms and beliefs, barriers to seeking help may be logistical – such as a difficulty in being able to access transportation and fees or bypass cultural or linguistic differences.

"Some people don't think therapy can be effective because they would not know what to talk about to the therapist. Then there is the fear and shame of being branded 'crazy' or being stigmatised by employers, co-workers, peers or family."

The first step to solving this multilayered problem – the proverbial half-won battle – is to make people comfortable with the idea of reaching out for help. "I believe asking for

## STRAIGHT TALK

Here are some phrases experts say you should refrain from using when talking to someone who's struggling or seeking help:

- Cheer up
- It could've been worse
- There are people in worse situations
- Pray more, it will make you feel better
- You're being selfish

help begins with self-compassion. We tend to have a lot of compassion for loved ones, but we also need to direct some of it to our own selves," says Schonder.

"Simply acknowledging and identifying an issue can make it less overwhelming," says Celebi.

"Talking to a few trusted people, opening up about your struggle, seeking online support groups, reading self-help books, or practising

- You're burdening the people who love you
- You'll feel better if you try harder
- There's nothing wrong with you
- You have so much to be grateful for
- Let's get a drink, it will make you feel better
- You just have to snap out of it
- Don't think about it so much
- Here we go again

small acts of self-care such as meditation, breathwork, yoga and exercise can help a person regain some feeling of control."

While being able to ask for and receive it is the most important part of the mental health equation, offering care and support in the right way is just as crucial. However, as established, this is where things become murky, because what are the rules when there is no one right approach?

"The most important thing is that we respond to people's mental health problems with empathy. Not judge them, but help them feel valued," says Schonder.

Empathy, she stresses, is the only constant. Yet this does not mean a complete erasure of boundaries. For example, it does not mean taking on the responsibility of fulfilling every need and being everything to the loved one in question.

What it does mean is this: holding the space for the person to feel what they're feeling without making it about yourself or its effect on you. It means allowing them their expression without fear of being judged or labelled.

Leading with empathy means opening, sometimes repeatedly, the door to uncomfortable conversations, but then letting

