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Kathryn Grover

Brigham Young University, cisneroskathryn@gmail.com

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Anxious to Help the Anxious

by Kathryn Grover

Amidst my little brother shaking, crying, and screaming, you could see the plea for help in his eyes—it was as if his soul was begging for relief, yet his body wouldn't stop. It couldn't stop.

My brother's anxiety changed everything about my family's day-to-day life. He was pulled out of school and homeschooled by my mother. We were afraid to try anything because we didn't know what would trigger an attack. When he would experience anxiety attacks, there were times we would just sit and stare out of exhaustion and fear of making it worse. We would have done anything to help but did not know where to begin.

With the help of my mother's diligent research, visits with multiple therapists, priesthood blessings, and a short period of medication, my brother no longer suffers from it today.

“Some days, I felt as though I was walking on a tightrope, worrying that with one gust of wind, everyone would see me fall.”

I always told people that it would have been easier for me to suffer from anxiety than it was for me to watch him, whom I loved, suffer from it. That was true until I experienced anxiety myself.

My Story

My anxiety started out small and was easily managed. Within a matter of months, however, I realized that my usually bold and confident personality was teetering. I went from starting conversations with friends to avoiding friends altogether.

There were nights I would cry and shake because it felt like my brain was going 1,000 mph down a curvy mountain road. I knew how stupid it was to obsess over my husband being two minutes late coming home from work, but knowing how insignificant this matter was often made matters worse.

I was often astonished at how quickly my ability to communicate would vanish. My mind would instantly fill with loud spiraling thoughts that somehow only I could

hear. I would get so frustrated because I knew if I could even get one sentence out of my mouth, my husband could have a hint on how to help me. He would sit and cry with me, desperately wanting to keep me grounded yet not knowing where to begin.

For over a year, my husband and my counselors were the only ones who knew about my anxiety. I lived in fear, wondering how people would react and whether they would treat me differently if they knew my deepest weakness.

Some days, I felt as though I was walking on a tightrope, worrying that with one gust of wind, everyone would see me fall.

Thankfully, with the help of my husband and others, I have learned to manage my anxiety to the point where I hardly struggle from it. Similar to my brother, it took a family member's diligent research, visits to multiple therapists, and priesthood blessings to get me to where I am today.

Journeying toward recovery has taught me a great deal about helping those who, like my brother and me, are often unable to communicate their fears and needs. Often, friends who have heard my story ask, “Why didn't you just reach out to us?” The fact of the matter is that sometimes it feels debilitating, even impossible, for those struggling with mental health issues to simply “reach out.”

After seeing my husband's face reflect the same desperation I felt as I watched my brother suffer, I have reflected deeply about how friends and family can lessen their anxiousness to help the anxious.

Because a mental illness can be so difficult to express, it's time to stop telling those who are struggling to “reach out” and start telling those who aren't struggling to reach out to those who are. In a loving and genuine manner, find out how your loved ones are doing, help them discover coping and recovery options, and encourage honest and open communication.

If you are concerned that someone you love is not acting like themselves and may possibly be walking that figurative

“tight rope,” please consider these following points so that you can be there to break their fall:

1. Recognize the symptoms.

For those not struggling with a mental illness, it is crucial to understand the different types and symptoms of those who are struggling. Some symptoms of anxiety include, but are not limited to, excessive worry, trouble sleeping, change in behavior, feeling weak or tired, and having difficulty concentrating.

When my mom was frantically searching for answers on how to help my brother, her friends recognized the symptoms. They noticed my mom trying to drop my brother off at school and saw the tears on both of their faces as they left with him still in the car. They noticed the drop in social activity that happened in our home. Because they reached out and shared stories of their own, my mom was able to begin to understand what was happening and then seek the proper help.

2. Have a plan for when an anxiety attack hits.

It can be difficult to know when an anxiety attack might hit your loved one, but it is important to know what to do in the heat of the moment.¹ Though different for everyone, some general tips to prepare for anxious moments can be to practice breathing exercises, engage in light exercise, or focus on a certain object in a room.

Prior preparation for an anxiety attack can be very helpful and may require some creativity. Early on, my husband and

I realized that speaking during an attack was very difficult for me. We learned that he could ask me “yes” or “no” questions. Since I couldn’t respond with words, I would squeeze his hand to indicate a “yes” answer. It was the only way for us to communicate at times.

“Spiritual guidance is important in dealing with a mental illness but it should not be the only source one seeks.”

3. Turn to spiritual and professional options for help.

If your loved one is not seeking professional help, you may need to do some research and help them understand their options for trained and qualified assistance. Your role is not to decide for them but to support² and motivate them on the recovery path they choose to go down.

Spiritual guidance is important in dealing with a mental illness, but it should not be the only source one seeks. If a family member had a terminal illness, the best medical and spiritual care would be sought after. Families would gladly accept the help of honest medical professionals and, if needed, the prescriptions they prescribe. The same should be true for a mental illness.

4. Maintain your own physical and mental well-being.

Trying to help someone can be frustrating and draining. It is important to maintain your own mental health when dealing with someone who is struggling. An ecclesiastical leader expressed it this way: “For caregivers, in your devoted effort to assist with another’s health, do not destroy your own. In all these things be wise. Do not run faster than you have strength. Whatever else you may or may not be able to provide, you can offer your prayers and you can give ‘love unfeigned.’”³

5. Be someone they can trust with their real emotions.

Most of the time you will not, and should not, try to “fix” the problem. To you, it seems simple to remove an insignificant stressor and think that all will then be well. But you can only see the surface of the issue, like the tip of an iceberg, and there is much more to it underneath the surface.

Most often, what your struggling one needs is for you to sit with them and be ready to listen when they are ready to talk. Be someone that they can trust with their real emotions.

Photo by Paola Chaaya on Unsplash



If you are a caregiver, realize that what they are going through is not your fault. My husband would often feel hurt and frustrated when he realized that I only had anxiety attacks in front of him. This caused him to think that he was the one causing them. In reality, he was the only one I trusted to let my real emotions show.

Our Circle of Support

While my younger brother was struggling, many people reached out to my family with help and personal experiences, giving us the supportive network we desperately needed. We reached out to church leaders, and we often fell to our knees in prayer as a family. My mom claims that without the support of her empathetic friends who were courageous enough to reach out, and her pleas to God, she would not have made it through.

In my own experience, I will forever be thankful to my husband and to God for their constant support and love despite the pain I caused them. Without their support, I would not have recovered in the ways that I have.

If you have a loved one struggling with anxiety or any form of mental illness, be patient. Slowly but surely, your understanding and ability to help them will increase. As they try to navigate their own figurative “tightrope,” you can be a crucial part of the support that helps bring balance into their life.

***Kathryn Grover** graduated from BYU with a degree in Human Development. She loves beating her husband at card games and sipping on a Texas Tap from Swig.*

Endnotes

¹ How to stop a panic attack: 13 ways to help. (2018, April 16). *Medical News Today*. <https://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/321510.php>

² Supporting recovery. (n.d.). *NAMI*. <https://www.nami.org/Find-Support/Family-Members-and-Caregivers/Supporting-Recovery>

³ Holland, J. R. (2013, October). Like a broken vessel. *The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints*. <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2013/10/like-a-broken-vessel?lang=eng>