2

Supporting Your Partner Effectively

Harper pulled up to the driveway and sat in her car for a few moments. She needed a couple minutes to decompress. She inhaled and exhaled slowly, bracing herself for what she might find at home. Harper predicted that her partner, Hiro, would be on the couch, still in pajamas or sweatpants, watching television. That made her feel bitter. She wanted to support Hiro, yet Harper felt ambivalent. She was sick of the caregiver role and tired of being the only one to keep everything running smoothly. Harper longed for a relationship that wasn't so one-sided.

When she got in the house, Harper walked to the den where she *knew* she would find Hiro. "Hey," she said. "Hey," Hiro mumbled back. "Did you eat today?" she asked. He shrugged. "Not really." That answer would typically make Harper rush to get something for Hiro to eat, but now it irritated her. She looked at him, slouched on the couch, unshaven, and appearing disheveled. Part of her wanted to hold him and tell Hiro that everything would be okay. Another part of her wanted to shake him.

You probably picked up this book because you're experiencing some of the same responses to your partner's depression as Harper. You may be struggling with balancing support for your partner with help for yourself and your relationship. You didn't ask to be a caregiver and might crave a more reciprocal relationship. Feelings like Harper's—ambivalence, worry, fatigue, resentment—are both valid and common among partners of individuals with depression.

Using some of the strategies outlined in this chapter (and throughout the book) will help you be the best support you can be. If you're worn out and frustrated, despite your love for your partner, being the best support you

can be might understandably sound like a one-sided benefit. Please know that it's not. Yes, supporting your partner effectively will increase the odds that your partner's depression will improve. But it will also make your partner less likely to withdraw from you and isolate themself. You will be more able to deescalate conflict in conversations with your partner. You're likely to end up more satisfied in your relationship, and your relationship will have the best chance of healing, growing, and strengthening. Eventually, through your persistence, your partner may get to a point where they can reciprocate, and you will feel like you have a more rewarding relationship. You're probably reading this book because this is what you want.

The Importance of Social Support

Human beings are the most social of animals in the world, and our relationships contribute importantly to our physical and mental well-being. We are wired to be loved, to love, and to belong. Researchers have demonstrated, for example, that having strong social connections is a greater determinant of good health than smoking, high blood pressure, and obesity. When people feel well supported, they are healthier, have stronger immune systems, and, as a result, recover more quickly from physical illness. When someone is in physical pain, just seeing a picture of their supportive, romantic partner can reduce their levels of pain and decrease activity in areas of the brain that are associated with pain. In contrast, feeling lonely, isolated, or unsupported increases the risk of mortality and is associated with various health problems, including heart disease and stroke, high blood pressure, and chronic pain.

Social support also plays a major role in good mental health. Many studies suggest that feeling supported is beneficial to our mental health and can help us prevent, or recover from, various mental health problems. Being able to confide in others affords better stress management, lowers distress, and reduces the risk of experiencing depression. One study of more than 100,000 people tested the relationship between 106 modifiable risk factors and the odds of being depressed six to eight years later. The ability to confide in others rose to the top as *the number-one protective factor against depression*.

Social support involves feeling loved, valued, and having people you can turn to who will lend a hand when you are feeling down or need assistance. Unfortunately, individuals with clinical depression tend to feel less supported than people who don't experience mental health problems. This finding holds true in myriad studies across different nations, ages, and genders. When

individuals with depression view their social support as inadequate, they experience more problems with depression and their chance of improvement worsens.

Being there for your partner when they are experiencing depression can help them function better and gives them the lift they need to carry on, improve, and even thrive. Feeling supported by you increases your partner's chance of feeling less stressed, experiencing more positive emotions, and having fewer symptoms of anxiety and depression.

The support you provide is critical not just for its potential benefits to your partner but also because you're likely the primary source of support for them. Partner support is relied on more frequently than support from family, friends, or other sources.

That undoubtedly sounds like a lot of pressure, especially when you add the fact that for social support to be effective it needs to be *perceived* as supportive by your partner. Otherwise, it generally won't be that helpful.

At this point you're probably thinking, *Oh great. Not only do I have to do all the giving, but I also have to make sure my attempts at support land with my partner! My partner perceives everything in a negative light, so how am I to know what will feel supportive?* Without really knowing what your partner is experiencing, how can you figure out what is working or not working? Do you use trial and error? Do you reach out, or back off? Do you give in to your partner's need to be alone, or try to connect? Do you provide solutions to their problems, or just let them work through it on their own?

You may want to encourage and provide support but are anxious about saying the wrong thing and setting off a cascade of negative feelings, frustration, and hurt. Perhaps you've tried many times, and nothing seems to change or, worse, you feel as though your partner doesn't want your support or neglects to follow through on any of your recommendations. Where do you begin?

Connect First

As much as we try to be a good support for our partners, we so easily flounder. That's often because we aren't always sure what to say. It's also because we jump to try to fix our partner's problems.

Isaiah came home after a long day at work and saw that Aiysha was feeling down. She had just gotten her performance evaluation from work, and it wasn't as positive as Aiysha was expecting. Isaiah tried to be as supportive

as possible. Knowing that jumping in to try to fix things didn't work in the past, Isaiah tried hard to be supportive in a way that wasn't advice-giving. Unfortunately, it also didn't match what Aiysha needed. He said, "It will be okay. You'll be all right. I know you've worked hard for your promotion, but another opportunity will come along." Aiysha didn't feel heard. Instead, she felt as though Isaiah was trying to improve her feelings about the situation by shifting the way she thought about it. What she really needed was to be heard. Isaiah's intention was noble, but the impact was, well, not great.

The next day Aiysha met an acquaintance for coffee and mentioned her disappointment about the performance evaluation. This person, who Aiysha hardly knew, put her hand on Aiysha's and said, "I am so sorry. It's so difficult when you work so hard and don't get the recognition you deserve." Aiysha instantly felt heard, accepted, and understood.

Being understood, validated, and cared for is a constant human need. The need for other forms of support, like helping your partner reframe their circumstances or offering advice, varies depending on the situation and how well you can match your partner's needs.

Many years ago psychiatrist John Bowlby developed attachment theory, which has helped us understand not only the need to connect with our partner but also the predictions we make and the expectations we have in relationships. It has become the dominant model for understanding early social development and has a ton of research behind it.

The basic idea is that we develop an affectionate bond, called an *attachment,* early in life based on our contact with caregivers. If our caregivers were responsive to us and met our needs for security and safety, we developed a secure attachment, which meant that, as youngsters, we could explore the world around us and know that our caregivers would reliably be there for us (they provided a secure base). And we would expect future romantic and other relationships to function similarly.

Children whose primary caregivers didn't meet their needs or only met them inconsistently, develop an insecure attachment. For example, they may be anxiously attached, where they grow up believing they are not worthy of love and fear abandonment or rejection. These individuals may fear that future partners will reject them, and they may act clingy or hypervigilant to threats in their relationship. Someone who develops an avoidant attachment, on the other hand, likely had caregivers who were emotionally unavailable, didn't tolerate the expression of feelings, and raised the child to be emotionally tough and overly independent. Growing up, these individuals may not tolerate emotional or physical intimacy very well. Based on our attachment

experiences, we tend to develop what's called an *internal working model.* This is basically our main way of viewing relationships—what we expect and what we perceive. This system becomes most activated when we are facing stress or adversity (for example, depression).

The main point is that there is a fundamental (nearly universal) need to connect, be heard, and be validated. We need our relationships to be secure and consistent for us. Your partner may not be there for you right now, at least not in the ways you would like them to be. That itself is depressing and disheartening. But when you are the best support you can be during this time, your partner is more likely to improve and start giving back to the relationship in the ways you need and desire. The second point is that by supporting our partners we can provide them with a safe haven (knowing that they can come to us for comfort) and a secure base (knowing that we will be there to support their goals and aspirations). As David Brooks noted in *How to Know a Person,* when we talk to someone, we're engaging in an "official" conversation and an "actual" conversation, the official conversation consisting of words and the topic being discussed and the actual one consisting of "the ebb and flow of underlying emotions being transmitted." The impact is that the person we are talking to either feels safer or more endangered with every comment.

When our partners are available, sensitive, and responsive to our needs, especially in a time of crisis, we have a sense of being securely attached. In contrast, when our partners are unresponsive, unavailable, or act insensitively, we are more likely to experience the attachment as insecure.

One way of providing support in a way that connects is to borrow from client-centered therapy, which highlights the importance of the therapist–client relationship (which decades of research have demonstrated is a necessary, although not sufficient, component of every effective psychological treatment). Client-centered therapy was developed by the famous psychologist Carl Rogers, who argued that people flourish when provided with the right conditions for growth. Just as a plant will naturally grow with adequate soil, water, and sunlight, your relationship with your partner will grow under certain conditions, including:

- ***Unconditional positive regard:*** Respecting and caring for your partner, their self-concept, and their feelings and accepting your partner for who they are.
- ***Genuineness:*** Being real, genuine, open, and authentic in your interactions with your partner.

- ***Empathy:*** Being attuned to your partner's feelings and beliefs and attempting to really understand and pinpoint your partner's experience and their inner world. Through empathy, you sense your partner's struggles and their thoughts and beliefs as though they were your own, without anger, fear, or confusion. With this clear sense of your partner's world, you can communicate understanding, including your awareness of what their experiences mean.

So, here's a good rule of thumb: always connect first. Provide messages to your partner that they are not alone in this. Messages that you understand and care. Messages that validate their experience. Messages of comfort, warmth, and simply being there: "I'm here for you. What can I do for you?" Then, if your partner wants other forms of support, provide those—but only with their permission.

TRY THIS: CONNECT FIRST

Experiment for a week or two with connecting first. When you are with your partner, try to relay messages that you are really there for them, that you are in this together. Show empathy. Express that you care. Practice with phrases like "I am here for you" or simply sit with your partner and demonstrate warmth and compassion and care. You will likely find that your partner feels more supported by these efforts than attempts to give them advice or provide information. Then, if they don't offer it up themself, ask them, "Are there other ways I can support you better?"

Connect or Cope?

One study looked at both connect and cope strategies. Connect strategies are a type of emotional support that focuses on helping your partner know that they aren't alone—that they are connected to you and valued by you. Cope strategies, on the other hand, focus on trying to help your partner feel better or to fix their problems: "I'll help you. I'll work to change how you feel. I'll try to provide information that may be useful. I'll support you in tangible ways." When researchers inquired about people's support preferences, they found that 81% of connect strategies were perceived as supportive whereas only 42% of cope strategies were believed to be helpful or supportive.

But if connect strategies are so helpful, why is it that we tend not to use them in our initial attempts to support our partners? Why, instead, do we try to cheer our partner up and provide hope that things will get better, as Isaiah did? Why is it that we offer informational support and advice about effective treatments or activities we have done that lift our own moods? How come we provide instrumental support that helps our partner deal with the demands of daily living, like booking or getting to appointments?

Because we don't *believe* that connect strategies are the most helpful. Validation of our partners seems less important to us than other types of support. We so desperately want to make our partners feel better *now*. We feel as though validation isn't providing the right "help" with the immediacy we need. Strangely, research demonstrates that even when supporters know that their partners want validation, they still lean toward trying to fix things.

Always connect first, then ask whether other support is wanted or needed.

Check Your "Fix-It Reflex"

Drs. William Miller and Stephen Rollnick developed motivational interviewing, an evidence-based treatment approach that helps people overcome ambivalence toward change. The approach was developed to help individuals overcome addictions and has since been expanded to other mental health problems where ambivalence might be an important feature. Rather than being characteristic of "addicted people," Miller and Rollnick postulated that the defensiveness and resistance to change in clients with substance use issues might be a result of how clients were being treated by their therapists. What they came to realize was that therapists tended to push for change and give advice, which backfired and was met with resistance when people were ambivalent about or not yet ready for change. The term they used to describe this tendency is the *righting reflex* (or the *fix-it reflex*).

TRY THIS: EXAMINING YOUR FIX-IT REFLEX

Have you ever had an experience where you were thinking of making changes in your life but felt kind of ambivalent? Perhaps you were contemplating losing weight, exercising more, or drinking less but weren't quite ready to put that ice cream away, sign up for a gym membership, or put aside that single-malt scotch. Now imagine that someone you love tries to persuade you to make this change, telling you all the reasons this

change would be good for you and stressing how important it is. They might even list all the negative things that could happen if you don't make this change: how your appearance might get worse as you age, how your body won't recover as quickly from injury, how your cardiac health will diminish. In addition, they might highlight all the benefits that are in store for you if you did make this leap. They might even give you lots of advice about how you can go about making this change.

Take a few minutes to consider what your reaction would be to this well-intended act of persuasion and advice giving. How would you feel?

I do this exercise with my graduate class when we review motivational interviewing. Students in my class break off into pairs for about 10 minutes. One person acts as the persuader and the other as the person contemplating change. The responses are the same year after year. Students who were in the receiving end of getting advice felt angry, agitated, oppositional, and defensive. They felt as though they were not understood or heard; they felt discounted and invalidated; they felt overwhelmed, manipulated, ashamed, trapped, disengaged, uncomfortable, and resistant.

This is a normal human reaction to receiving unsolicited help and advice. We need to be careful to keep the "fix-it reflex" in check. Instead, we need to behold our partner and just be there for them rather than giving advice or trying to fix them.

Partners of individuals with depression can also fall into the trap of the "fix-it reflex." This is perfectly understandable. You want to make this right and may have very good ideas of the path your partner should take to improve their mood. Many people (men in particular) say they try to fix things for their partner whatever the problem is because they hate to see their loved one in pain and just want to help them eliminate it. The problem with this well-intentioned strategy is that it can lead to conflict, despair, and hurt.

Really Hear Your Partner

The fix-it reflex pushes us to act immediately, jump in to solve problems, and make things right for our partners when all they want is to connect, be validated, cared for, and heard. Unfortunately, as a society, we have become very poor at listening. Really listening. Part of the problem is that we are so enveloped in our own thoughts, deadlines, and objectives that we don't pause for long enough to simply be together.

I am very blessed to have grown up in a family that I adore. My parents modeled unconditional positive regard to me and demonstrated that love for each other. I also have a great relationship with my siblings and my nieces and nephew. When we are all together as a family, we often have a dinner (usually at my sister's place) and then play games or just sit around and chat. One evening, however, we were all on our devices, every one of us (including my father, who was no spring chicken). I was so amused and stunned by this that I took a photo.

In the age of instant gratification, we have learned to manage downtime by checking notifications and viewing our social media accounts. We have collectively lost the ability to really listen. When our partners are speaking, we are often thinking about what we are going to say next and neglect to really give them our full and undivided attention.

To listen well is a skill. It is more than just holding your tongue; it is active. Listening well is hard work. We must let go of our own needs, desires, and self-absorption and enter deeply into what our partner is experiencing and expressing. We need to forget ourselves and really attend to our partner. We can't simply pay lip service and feign attentiveness when what we are really doing is coming up with and rehearsing what we plan to say in return. When we prepare ourselves to respond, our ability to listen vanishes. We need to be there authentically. This is the essence of connecting—to really understand, value, and care for our partner.

Sometimes you may feel as though your partner is pushing you away. The natural inclination (largely for your own protection) is to withdraw and distance yourself. You might wonder why you even bother and proceed to build walls around yourself. What you really need to do is the opposite. You need to lean in. You need to forget about yourself and show your partner that you are there for them.

If you want some really excellent resources for learning how to listen well and connect with your partner, check out Brooks's *How to Know a Person* or Nichols and Straus's *The Lost Art of Listening.* These books masterfully describe how to fully attend and connect.

TRY THIS: REALLY LISTENING

The next time your partner is opening up to you or telling you about their day, just listen. Really try to immerse yourself in what they're saying. Don't rehearse what you want to say in return. Just listen. Try this out a few

times and you might be surprised at your partner's response. It may take some time to get good at this, but by really listening to your partner—*really* listening—you will help them feel validated, cared for, and understood.

You Can't Read Minds

Research has demonstrated that there are different types of support: emotional, instrumental, informational, and cognitive. Emotional support involves being empathic, understanding, validating, and caring for your partner (the connect-first stuff we reviewed earlier). Instrumental support is helping your partner in tangible ways, doing things for them such as helping them fix a problem, cooking dinner, and meeting concrete needs. Informational support is providing suggestions and advice. Finally, cognitive support is trying to help your partner examine and reappraise themself or their circumstances from a different perspective. Of all these forms of support, emotional support is seen as most helpful. To reiterate, connect first, then ask whether other forms of support would be helpful.

A considerable amount of research has focused on the extent to which support provided matches what the recipient needs or desires. In general, high levels of support are related to lower distress and higher relationship satisfaction. However, as noted earlier in this chapter, good support needs to be tailored so that it is *perceived* as supportive.

What your partner requires at a particular time may differ from what they want on another occasion. From your perspective, you're being supportive. You may think that doing what you can—whether it is emotional, instrumental, informational, or cognitive—is what matters. But to be considered supportive and helpful to your partner, its quantity and quality must be what your partner wanted and needed. For example, at times and with every good intention, you may be providing too much or too little support for what your partner needs. This can negatively impact their mood and how satisfied they feel in the relationship. When you're better able to match the support you provide with your partner's needs, you're more likely to be seen as supportive, and the outcome will be more positive.

Sometimes we all project what we're feeling and assume that this is what our partner is going through. When we do this, we are likely to be inaccurate and unsupportive. Numerous studies have demonstrated that we don't predict

well what people are thinking and feeling. When we base our support on what we think our partner needs, we're likely to make things worse. No one wants to hear advice that they didn't ask for. No one wants you to tell them that they should go to therapy or start a new regime of antidepressant medication. No one wants to be told that they should get outside of the house more or change their thinking. When we do this, we are only relaying the message that we don't really understand our partners and that their feelings and experiences are not valid.

You can't read your partner's mind. You don't have a crystal ball, nor do you have some superpower ability to accurately know what they are feeling and experiencing. Your aptitude for perceiving what others are thinking and feeling, in fact, typically sucks. One study found that married couples are accurate about their partners' thoughts and feelings only about 35% of the time at most. Which is why you need to ask your partner. We all need to listen. We need to get their take on the situation. From their mouths, in their words. Ironically, we tend to rely on our own experiences as a basis for making judgments about our partners when we have the least information. This is yet another reason to check with them.

Sometimes your partner may want advice, or assistance, or help reappraising their thinking. But here's the rule you should use; I am mentioning this a third time because I think it is *that* important: Rule 1, connect always. Rule 2, ask if they would like you to support them in other ways. If the answer is yes, then get the specifics of what they might truly be looking for.

It isn't all up to you. Your partner has an important role to play as well. They need to let you in rather than withdraw from you. As tough as it may be, they need to be able to express what they are going through and what support they need from you. They are most likely to do this when you connect first.