

## HOW FRIENDS AND FAMILY CAN HELP

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For the people who love and care about you, seeing you struggle with anxiety every day can be very difficult. Friends and family usually want to help you to deal with your anxiety. However, sometimes they inadvertently do things that are not so helpful.

### What Friends and Family do that is NOT Helpful

Your friends and family are often trying their best to help; but the following list includes things that they do that might (inadvertently) be maintaining your fears and anxiety in the long-term.

#### → Following the Rules

- Some people with anxiety have set up their whole lives in such a way that they can avoid situations that cause anxiety. For example, some people will not go into certain situations without a companion or a “safe person” with them. Others will have “rules” about what to do at home. For example, an anxious person might have every one in the house wash a certain way or dictate when and how to answer the phone.
- Although it might seem helpful to have your family assist you in coping with your anxiety, what they are actually doing when they follow your rules is **helping you to AVOID anxiety**.



**REMEMBER:** Avoiding anxiety only works in the short-term. Facing your anxiety is the only way to effectively manage it in the long-term.

#### → Keeping You Out of Danger

- Because it can be troubling for friends and family to see you feeling anxious, they can sometimes “keep you out of danger” before you are even in an anxious situation. For example, if you go to a movie with a family member, they might automatically choose seats in the back and near the exit so that you can “escape” if you are feeling anxious. Or, a loved one might pull you out of a social situation as soon as you look even a bit uncomfortable.

- Once again, it is clear that friends and family are trying to help. But the message that they are actually sending when they do this is that **anxiety is dangerous and needs to be avoided at all costs.**



**REMEMBER:** Anxiety is uncomfortable and sometimes unpleasant, but it is not dangerous. It is a normal and necessary system in the body.

### → Pushing Too Much

- Not all loved ones try to keep you out of anxious situations. More and more people are starting to hear about the benefits of facing your fears. Because of this, some friends and family will try to push you into anxious situations before you are ready or without telling you first. For example, if you are afraid of dogs they might take you to a dog park without telling you, or come to your house with a dog and ask you to pet it.
- Although trying to help you face your fears is a good thing, when it is sprung on you suddenly, it that can feel very scary and overwhelming. It is a bit like the old idea of learning how to swim by being thrown in a lake: this won't help you learn how to swim, it will only make you scared of water and probably distrusting of the person who pushed you. Loved ones who push too much are actually **making the world a scary place for you, and are going to cause you to distrust them.**



**REMEMBER:** Although it is important for you to face your fears, it is best to do it gradually and at your own pace.

## Helpful Strategies for Friends and Family

There are several things that friends and family can do to help.

### → Learning about Anxiety

- When struggling with anxiety, an important first step for you is to learn about what anxiety is and the strategies that are helpful in the long run. If family and friends are going to help you, they need to know this information too.
- Teach them what you know about anxiety, and encourage them to find out more information about CBT and effective strategies for managing anxiety.



**REMEMBER:** Your friends and family are more likely to be able to help you if they understand what you are doing to manage your anxiety.

### → Practising Skills with Others

- An important part of managing your anxiety is learning new and more effective ways of thinking and behaving in anxious situations. In order to do this, you need to practise the skills that you have learned. Friends and family can be a great help with this.
- Have your loved ones practise with you. For example, if you are learning calm breathing, do it with others. If you are going to face your fears, you can bring someone along at first. You can even include your family and friends in your exposure ladders. For example, if you are facing a fear of going into a crowded mall, you might first go with a loved one before trying to go alone.



**REMEMBER:** It can be much easier to practise your skills when someone is doing them with you.

### → Avoiding Avoidance/ Giving Reminders

- Since it is not helpful for your loved ones to encourage you to avoid the things that make you feel anxious, they can instead encourage you to use your CBT skills when you are feeling this way.
- Have your friends and family remind you that you are feeling anxious, and that it might be a good time to think about using some of your strategies. For example, if you are in an anxious situation, loved ones can remind you to do some calm breathing or to come up with a coping thought.



**REMEMBER:** Although avoidance reduces your anxiety in the short-term, it doesn't work in the long-term. Using your skills in anxious situations is the best way to cope with anxiety in the long run.

## → Remembering Not to Push

- Although you want your loved ones to encourage you to master your anxiety, it is important that you do so at your own pace. If you enter an anxious situation before you feel ready, you are probably going to feel overwhelmed and end up escaping the situation.
- Tell your family and friends that they need to respect the pace that you are setting for dealing with your anxiety. They can encourage you to try new things, but they should not force you into new situations.



**REMEMBER:** Exposure works best if it is done gradually, starting small and working your way up.



A final point...

### THE FINE LINE BETWEEN ENCOURAGING AND NOT PUSHING

It might seem confusing to your loved ones when they are told that they should not **encourage avoidance** but that they also should not **push you into anxious situations**.

So when is it not enough and when is it too much?

As a general rule, family and friends are most helpful when they give you a **gentle nudge** to face your fears, but will stop pushing if you say that a situation is too scary. A good idea is to have family and friends help you think about what you can do to face your fears instead of the situation that is too scary for you.

**Remember:** If something is too difficult, there is always a way to make it easier!

For example, if a loved one nudges you to go pet a dog and you are too afraid of dogs to do it, then you can both think about what you can do instead. You might go for a walk together near a dog park, but without actually petting one of the dogs.