What to Say to Someone With Arthritis

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Helpful, Supportive Things to Say and Do

Living with osteoarthritis in three levels of my spine has been very difficult and frustrating at times. Although I have learned to deal with the physical aspects of my condition, I often still struggle with other people's reactions to my physical limitations.

Unfortunately, it has been difficult for many people in my life to understand how difficult is and many people, though usually well meaning, have made hurtful comments. I, along with many other osteoarthritis pain sufferers, often need the understanding and support of others in order to better cope with the disease.

So, what should you be saying to people like me? We're not looking for pity or radical suggestions on how to get better, and we're not trying to complain endlessly. Often times we are simply seeking support, validation, empathy, and understanding for the feelings we are experiencing.

The following are a few statements that are helpful and appropriate to use:

"It sounds like the pain is really bad today. Is there any way I can help?"

One of the better approaches to take is to paraphrase back what a person is feeling and let them know that you are there to help them in any way possible. Arthritis sufferers sometimes feel they are alone in their struggle, so letting us know you are there for us if needed is a tremendous statement to make.

It is easy to feel overwhelmed with the simple tasks of daily living when one has physical limitations, and having help can make all the difference. Sometimes I won't need help, or my pain isn't that bad, but just knowing I have help if need be is a tremendous relief.

Many doctors use this technique of recognizing how their patients are feeling to build a positive relationship, and it is a very effective strategy.

"I believe you."

Sadly, half the battle for an arthritis sufferer is to get someone to acknowledge their pain and let them know the way they are feeling is valid. Arthritis is one of those diseases that can sometimes be brushed off as not serious by others because it lacks the shock value, as previously mentioned.

I went years and numerous doctors telling me that they thought I was complaining excessively because my MRI did not show any noticeable changes to them. Nothing hurts more than to have someone you value dismiss your pain, treat it with skepticism and even resentment.

When I finally met a doctor who told me he believed how much pain I was in, I had tears well up in my eyes and it

felt like a load had been taken off my shoulders. Consequently, because he believed me, I was offered proper modalities to alleviate my pain. A lot of times, arthritis sufferers just want to be told that their concerns and emotions are valid.

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“I know how hard you’re trying.”

It can be VERY frustrating for an arthritic sufferer to try numerous modalities to relieve their pain and to see them fail. It can be even more frustrating to deal with the same unpleasant disease every day and try to hold it together emotionally.

Trying won’t get you first place in most sports competitions, but in the journey of chronic pain and disease, giving your best effort should be commended. Although having someone reassure you that you are trying your best won’t change the course of arthritis, it is still very helpful to have your efforts be acknowledged.

“Instead of doing that, maybe we could try this?”

Although this one is a little vague, it is my personal favorite to hear from the people in my life. I like my loved ones to help offer solutions when the physical limitations of arthritis make certain activities challenging.

Fortunately, my wife is an expert at this; it is easy for me to look at a situation and feel down because of my physical limitations but she does a great job of coming up with possible alternatives to overcoming the solution. For instance, even though I can’t play pickup basketball with her or my friends, she makes sure I still get on the court to shoot hoops or play a game of horse.

Even if the options suggested aren’t viable, it means the world to me and other arthritic sufferers, because by offering solutions you are showing that you have observed the situation, are empathetic to the problem, and care enough to try to help them through it.

Nothing

Sometimes the best thing you can say is nothing. A lot of times I and other arthritic sufferers just want to know that you are there. A sympathetic ear and hug can be all that is. There have been times where I have unloaded feelings of stress, anger, sadness, frustration, on a loved one not because I expect a miracle or for them to change the situation, I just want someone to acknowledge that it is hard, remind me to stay positive, and let me know that they are there for me.

The severity of arthritis pain can be made worse when those around you say inconsiderate things. On the other hand, empathetic and caring statements towards arthritic sufferers can make all the difference.

When interacting with someone with arthritis, demonstrate understanding and empathy towards their struggle. All of the supportive phrases mentioned above have the theme of acknowledging the difficulties a person with arthritis may experience. They also help to validate the arthritis sufferer and let them know that they are not alone.

Living with physical limitations on a daily basis can be extremely hard, but having people around you giving you support through their words and actions can make coping with the condition much easier.