Avoid an Awkward Situation and Show Support for Asthmatics

by ANGLEA FINLAY

What Not to Say to Someone With Asthma

Ignoring asthma can be insensitive. When someone is clearly suffering, or you know they're living with a chronic illness, you want to address it, understand it, and help out if you can. However, chronic illness is a delicate subject, and asthma in particular is more mysterious and complex than you might imagine. And when you try to reach out without understanding the disease, you could wander into some treacherous territory.

Your intentions may be great, but the words you utter can turn a nice discussion into an awkward situation if you're not careful. Avoid the messy event altogether by leaving these phrases out of your conversation and adopting a more helpful and sensitive set of remarks. Here's what not to say to someone with asthma:

Phrases to Avoid at All Costs

There's certainly room to express your opinion and concern when you're speaking with an asthmatic person, but some questions and comments will do more harm than good. In general, assuming you know what they're going through will end in frustration, hurt, or even anger. Do yourself and your friend a favor and steer clear of these common conversational missteps.

'Maybe You Should Work on Your Fitness'

Although wheezing and coughing after walking up a flight of stairs could point to poor fitness, this is simply not the case for asthma sufferers. Narrow airways make it difficult for oxygen to get in and carbon dioxide to get out, and when that happens your whole cardiovascular system will surely suffer. Suggesting exercise as a solution is not seeing the forest for the trees — that is, you're focusing too much on the details and ignoring the whole picture.

Plenty of asthmatics are actually very active; some professional athletes have struggled with asthma throughout their lives. However, everyone is different and some people find their activity level changes drastically from day to day, depending on the severity of their symptoms.

In the end, the breathlessness of asthma doesn't suggest a weak body, but rather a malfunctioning respiratory system. It's important to remember that distinction.

'You Can Overcome Your Symptoms With Positive Thinking'

The sentiment here isn't totally misplaced — a positive attitude can definitely make a difference in how you view and experience a physical condition. But a bright outlook will only get you so far, and it's really no match for the wheezing, inflammation and dangerously constricted airways of an asthma attack.

Positive thinking is more suitable for finding something positive or rewarding to take from your situation, not for soldiering through the symptoms. Simply visualizing your airways opening is just not enough to override the

physiological event that’s happening in your body.

'You'll Develop a Tolerance If You Use Your Inhaler Too Much'

There’s a general consensus that taking too much medicine is bad for you, and in some cases, that’s absolutely true. Taking antibiotics every time you come down with a cold can eventually destroy your natural defenses, and overdoing it on pain meds can lead to a dangerous and unhealthy addiction. However, when it comes to both maintenance and rescue medication for asthma, a daily inhaler habit is not only okay, it’s often the healthiest way forward.

Next page: learn better ways to discuss asthma so you can show you care without sending the wrong message

Phrases to Avoid at All Costs

Preventative medication is important to keep inflammation and bronchial constriction at bay, and the better you can avoid these problems, the better your overall health and general asthma prognosis. And of course, a drug that can stifle the frightening and uncomfortable symptoms of an asthma attack deserves to be used. In the case of asthma medication, “tolerance” is not a bad word.

'Asthma’s Not so Bad'

Sometimes it seems that diminishing the severity of a disease can put it into better perspective and take some stress off the other person, but in reality it only serves to highlight the gap in understanding between you two.

Even if you have asthma yourself, don’t make the mistake of assuming your friend, coworker or family member is going through the very same experience. Perhaps your asthma is mild and you have no trouble managing the symptoms, but that doesn’t mean they’re falling short or making a big deal out of nothing. One universal rule of asthma is that is affects everyone differently — it’s simply impossible to know exactly how somebody else is suffering.

Better Ways to Discuss Asthma

If you want to show you care and offer help, you don’t have to shy away from discussion or interaction completely (that would almost certainly send the wrong message). In fact, some simple phrases can get your sympathy across, inspire confidence and make things much more comfortable. Try these out:

'I Believe You'

You don’t need to make promises; offer advice or pretend to understand everything. Sometimes all that’s needed is a genuine, supportive gesture, and this one’s perfect — especially when an asthma sufferer has been defending their disease to others.

'Want to Hang Out?'

This is in the same vein as the phrase above, but it brings a bit more to the table. Offering your company and friendship can go a long way. Asthma symptoms can keep people inside and isolated more than they would like, so offer to come to them.

'I Can Tell How Hard You're Trying'

Asthma symptoms can force people to miss appointments, reschedule events and back out of promises — things that many people will take personally and counter with blame. Instead, express your understanding and patience. Asthma isn’t their fault, and they shouldn’t feel guilty about it.

'I Don't Know What to Say, but I'm Here for You'

Inevitably, there will be a time where you just can’t come up with a reasonable response. Rather than fumble around for some sage advice or sympathetic quip, just be honest. You may have no words to offer, but you can help in a lot of other ways.

The more comfortable you are asking questions and listening without offering advice in return, the more successful any discussion about asthma will be. There’s a lot you can learn, and being open to learning shows genuine interest and respect for the other person. Remember, this shouldn’t be a power struggle — asthmatics struggle enough as it is.