

AVOID ASSUMPTIONS WHEN TRYING TO HELP

PRECONCEIVED NOTIONS CAN BE A ROADBLOCK TO SUPPORTING THOSE IN NEED, WRITES MELANIE MCGREGOR



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Column

Assumptions — beliefs or feelings that something is true without proof — are common when it comes to mental health.

They may include things like believing that



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Focus on listening and try to avoid making assumptions when offering someone help.

people of a certain age or race can't struggle with their mental health, or that someone who lives with a mental-health disorder can't be successful in a particular job.

Our assumptions can come from a number of places, including past experience, inaccurate information, and even discomfort. And when trying to

support others, assumptions can sidetrack us from making meaningful connections and providing helpful support.

So what can we do to avoid assumptions and support others in a way that fits what they are actually experiencing, rather than what we might assume?

Consider these tips:

- The magic word is "listen." Rather than thinking you know what someone is feeling, open your ears, hear it from them and believe what they are saying. If someone says they are feeling anxious, accept and validate that they are feeling anxious. Don't try to discount it with something like "They're too young to be anxious" or "They seem fine, so they must be fine."

- Pay attention to your own thoughts. If you find assumptions creeping in, take a moment to remind yourself to focus on what someone is saying rather than what you think they ought to be saying.

- Ask questions. For example, if you assume that someone has certain religious beliefs, you might say something like "You need to go to church." But, if you don't know for sure, ask a question instead,

something like "Are you part of a faith community?" Then, focus on helping them explore what would help them rather than assuming that you know what is best.

- Watch your words. The language you use can suggest assumptions and discomfort with the conversation that could contribute to someone feeling judged and reluctant to share. Saying something like "You aren't feeling stressed, are you?" suggests that either you think they shouldn't be feeling stressed or that you are hoping they answer "no" because you don't want to talk about it. "How are you feeling?" is a better, neutral, more open-ended way to go.

- Stay in the present. If you think about when someone has been upset in the past, you may dismiss

and discount what they're saying now with something like "They're always so emotional" or "Here we go again". Take each conversation on its own and remind yourself that no matter what they've experienced in the past, what they are experiencing now is valid.

If you'd like to learn more about supporting others, consider taking a Mental Health First Aid virtual course to gain valuable skills. Find upcoming sessions at www.halton.cmha.ca/programs-services/mental-health-first-aid.

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