

Disability Campaign.org

What Not to Say to a Person with an Invisible Illness



For years, Ivonne had struggled with digestive problems. It wasn't until recently, though, that she was diagnosed with ulcerative colitis — a chronic, inflammatory bowel disease that causes ulcers in the digestive tract and can be very painful. While sharing the diagnosis with a friend, Ivonne received a comment she wasn't expecting. **"But you look so good,"** Ivonne's friend said, while pointing to her great smile and trendy outfit. Comments like these — as well-intentioned as they may be — tell someone that they should feel the way they look.

We've all heard the phrase, "don't judge a book by its cover" — and that applies to illnesses or disabilities that may be hidden or invisible to the naked eye, such as autoimmune diseases, chronic pain, diabetes, or depression. Someone's physical appearance may not be a direct representation of their health or how they feel. It's why it's important to be mindful of your thoughts, attitudes, and words towards people you know who live with invisible illnesses.

In this article, we'll cover **what not to say** to a friend with a non-visible illness or disability, as well as words you can say to encourage them.

Comments to Avoid

1. **"But you don't look sick."** They may be having a "good day" or maybe the illness isn't visible due to clothing or makeup. Still, you don't have to "look" sick to be sick.

2. **"You're too young to be sick."**

Anyone can acquire an illness or disability at any age. Furthermore, some conditions are more common in younger people — like Type I diabetes in children or depression in young adults.

3. **"You know, everyone gets tired."**

People with chronic fatigue, fibromyalgia, heart disease or other disorders may experience extreme exhaustion and need more rest.



4. **"Come on, you're just having a bad day."**

For someone with a chronic illness, every day can be a "bad" day.

5. **"It must be nice to miss school or not go to work."** It's no fun to feel sick, be bedridden, or visit a doctor. Just because it's harder for someone to attend school or work, doesn't mean he or she is finding an excuse to avoid responsibility.

6. **"What if you just exercise more?"** Perhaps exercise may help, but that's not always the case. Sometimes, a disability or pain can prevent someone from exercising.

7. **"I think it's all in your head."** Positive thinking can help, and negative thoughts can lead to depression. Our mental wellbeing affects our physical health, but a bona fide illness is not a made-up problem.

8. **“You just have to push through it.”** Your friend probably already tries her hardest to succeed, accomplish tasks, and stay healthy on a day-to-day basis. Besides, comments like these can lead people to delay or ignore treatment.
9. **“In time, you’ll get better; don’t worry.”** If the health condition is chronic (long-term), progressive (gets worse with time), or even fatal, this may not be the best thing to say. Sure, one’s attitude can improve with time, but be careful with assuring improved health.
10. **“Have you tried [fill in treatment option]?”**

You don’t know what homeopathic or medicinal treatment options he has already tried. Furthermore, some supplements may interfere with prescription medications. Rather than giving a tip on how to cure his disease, ask if it’s okay to share an article or research study.



Encouraging Words

1. **“I believe you.”** It’s likely your friend’s illness or symptoms have been dismissed by others. By acknowledging her illness, you’re showing compassion and understanding.
2. **“I don’t understand, but I’m willing to learn.”** It means a lot to someone who is ill to know that friends and family are wanting to learn more about their condition. Ask if there’s a book or website that could help give you information on what their illness or disability is like and how you can best support them.
3. **“How can I be of help?”** What’s “helpful” to you may not be helpful to your friend, so start by asking and then follow up on it through your actions. Sometimes people feel shy about asking for help. In that case, below are three practical ways you could help.
4. **Cooking/buying a meal.** Chronic pain or depressed moods can make cooking a challenge. Ask what food restrictions they have and surprise them with a meal.

5. **Help run errands.** This is especially helpful if your friend cannot drive due to their illness or medications. Pick up the dry cleaning, mow the lawn, or offer to drop the kids off to school.
6. **Assist with house chores.** It can be hard to keep a tidy house when you're in pain, are feeling down, or are sensitive to chemicals.
7. **"I'm flexible — just let me know if that day/time doesn't work for you."** This gives your friend the flexibility to participate when he feels well, even if you don't notice it. And when you do get a chance to spend time together, express how much it means to you.
8. **"I can tell you're working at hard at this."** Try to be more empathetic, realizing that their struggles are constant. Acknowledge her effort to take care of her health and keep up her daily life. Cheer on your friend with affirmative words.

We don't always say the "right" things, and sometimes we're tempted to simply not say anything at all —after all, you don't want to offend your friend or discourage them. Or maybe you are afraid of saying the wrong thing. Still, silence is not an answer. If you're friend reaches out to you and shares details about his or her health struggles, lend a listening ear and give encouraging words. He or she may need to borrow your hope to get through tough days.

Try your best to be careful with your words, and if you notice your friend is upset or you realize you've said something offensive, apologize.



Helpful Websites and Related Resources

InvisibleDisabilities.org – A support group and discussion community

<https://invisibledisabilities.org/>

Invisible Disabilities: List & Information by the University of Massachusetts

<https://www.umass.edu/studentlife/sites/default/files/documents/pdf/Invisible%20Disabilities%20List%20%26%20Information.pdf>

DisabilityCampaign.org – Invisible Disabilities

<http://disabilitycampaign.org/help-resources/invisible-disabilities/>

Joni and Friends – A nonprofit that serves families affected by disability

<http://www.joniandfriends.org/>

RestMinistries.org – A support group for people with chronic illness

<http://restministries.com/>

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