

Bae got the blues

Dating someone with depression or anxiety can be extremely hard. Here's what to do that's best for both of you.

You're chilling with your main squeeze and feeling crazy happy. So how can it be that the person holding your hand is battling with feelings like hopelessness and despair? Since you want your bae to be happy, it's easy to fall into the trap of feeling responsible for 'fixing them' or making it all better. But anxiety and depression are bigger than what you (or anyone) as a girlfriend can solve. For advice we talked with psychologist Jennifer Shannon, author of *The Anxiety Survival Guide for Teens*. "When you're dating someone with depression, you can have a sense of over-responsibility," Jennifer says. "You feel like if they're not happy it's because you're not doing enough as a girlfriend or not loving them right, but you can't solve that person's depression. They need to get help on their own." Read on to see what you can do, how to protect yourself, and when to know it's time to walk away.

This article discusses self-harm and suicide which some readers might find triggering.

THE SIGNS

So what's the diff between a 'having a bad day' and a much bigger mental health problem? The first one might be what anyone would feel if they tanked on an exam or got yelled at on the job. But if your partner is unmotivated or withdrawn, is irritable all the time, feels hopeless or has a negative outlook on life, Jennifer says these are all signs they could be depressed and not just feeling down. Look out for signs like no longer showering, missing school because they can't face the world, or no longer enjoying their favourite things.

GETTING SOMEONE TO OPEN UP

As we mentioned, since someone with anxiety and depression can become withdrawn it can become frustrating (and even hurtful) when the person you care so much about won't even talk about it with you. So how can you break down that wall?

"You can say, 'Hey, I want to know what's going on and help in any way I can,' but you can't *make* someone talk to you," Jennifer says. It's the hard truth, but all you can do is make yourself available.

If your partner has anxiety or suffers from panic attacks, a good thing to do as a girlfriend is to spend time educating yourself on what your partner is going through (beyondblue has great resources for this). If you come across any helpful tips or books you can pass them along, but again it's up to your partner to use this advice or seek professional help. Yes this might make you feel powerless, but there's definitely value in them knowing you care and you're willing to help.

66 *It's so tempting to think that if you could just fix your boyfriend or girlfriend, then you'll both be happy. But you can't fix someone else's problem.* 99

LOOKING OUT FOR YOURSELF

When someone you love is going through a hard time it's easy to get consumed in helping them and neglect yourself. That's why Jennifer says it's important to look for red flags in your own life too.

"If you feel burnt out or are worrying about your partner obsessively, or if you are missing out on the things you want to do in life like hanging out with your friends or extracurricular activities at school, those are all red flags that you need to start taking better care of yourself," Jennifer says.

Having a strong support system is key. Going out with your friends, opening up about the situation to your mum or BFF, and taking part in activities you enjoy like sports, writing, or music are all ways to not get dangerously absorbed in helping your partner (with a problem that ultimately isn't yours to fix).

"Have the courage to go out if you want to – and I say courage because it can be hard," Jennifer says. "Sometimes staying in means you're taking responsibility for your partner's depression, which isn't healthy. And it's not going to make them less depressed either."

WHEN THINGS TURN DANGEROUS

The sad truth is depression is often linked to suicidal thoughts. Jennifer wants to get one thing straight: If your partner is threatening to kill themselves, you need to tell someone (a trusted adult, like a parent or school counsellor) immediately – even if it seems like a betrayal.

Sometimes, a boyfriend or girlfriend will threaten to hurt or possibly even kill themselves if you break-up with them. So does that mean you should stay in the relationship? Nope.

"Saying that [you want to stay with them] shows that person is making you feel responsible for their problems," Jennifer says. "As a girlfriend, you need to recognise that and separate yourself from the situation."

Again, she recommends telling an adult what's going on, since suicidal threats are serious stuff. And don't forget about helping yourself – you should talk to a counsellor about what you're going through too.

If your partner is cutting themselves or self-harming in another way, Jennifer says what you can do is listen with compassion and offer them resources that might help.

WHEN TO WALK AWAY

As much as you may love your boyfriend or girlfriend, sometimes you just have to leave.

"If your partner isn't seeking help, isn't interested in getting better and they're pulling you down with them, you need to walk away. Otherwise you'll end up feeling isolated or burnt out," Jennifer says. "It's so tempting to think that if you could just fix your boyfriend or girlfriend, then you'll both be happy. But you can't fix someone else's problem."

None of this is easy. It takes courage to walk away and put yourself first. But it's the only way you'll be happy in the long run.

"There's a difference between love and dependency," Jennifer says. "Healthy love is when both people can take care of themselves, stand on their own two feet, and mutually benefit from each other. When you depend on the other person – as in you need them in your life to be happy – that isn't love. It's important to know the difference."

If you're concerned for a partner, friend or even yourself, Kids Helpline (1800 55 1800) and beyondblue (1300 224 636) both offer free anonymous counselling services 24 hours a day, seven days a week. MoodGYM is a great free online resource, visit moodgym.anu.edu.au.