Depression, Motivation, and Recovering Agency · About 4 minutes

Company Without Having to Perform

Letting help concern the day you are actually having

A visit can end with the feeling that you were cared for and the exhaustion of having had to look well the whole time.

That is what happens to Rafi in this fictional example. He has been struggling with low mood and ordinary tasks. His neighbor comes over and suggests exercise classes, a new routine, and ways to get going again. Rafi spends most of the visit explaining why each idea feels difficult. Afterward, he appreciates the effort and wishes he hadn't had to work so hard.

He wanted company. What arrived required him to defend his limitations.

Concern can be sincere and still miss the form of support a person needs. Someone who is depressed may find themselves trying to reassure the helper: yes, I know you mean well; yes, I've considered that; yes, I intend to improve. Managing the helper's reaction can become an additional responsibility.

Fosha's experiential approach emphasizes responsive relationship in meeting difficult experience.[1] An ordinary neighbor's visit is not psychotherapy, and warmth alone is not a treatment for depression. Still, the question of accompaniment matters: can this person be with the day Rafi is actually having?

A different offer might be, “I can bring lunch and stay for a short visit. We don't have to work on anything.” Rafi might welcome that. He might instead want help arranging a health care appointment or prefer to be alone. The usefulness of the offer depends on his response.

A person may be able to explain what fits, or may be too tired to negotiate. A willing helper can reduce that burden by offering something concrete and limited. “Would lunch help?” is easier to consider than an open-ended request to design a support plan.

The helper's capacity matters as well. A short visit may be possible where an afternoon isn't. Stating that limit honestly helps both people. Punishing someone for needing more is another matter.

Bandura describes forms of agency that involve acting through others and acting together.[2] Receiving help can still include choice, consent, and correction. Rafi doesn't lose his part in the relationship because another person collects the food.

And the food can be useful even if his mood stays low. A completed task need not produce an improved emotional state before it counts. A helper who understands that may be less likely to keep searching for the suggestion that finally earns a smile.

Rafi may want advice next week. He may welcome encouragement on one day and find it exhausting on another. An earlier refusal doesn't prevent a later request. An earlier yes isn't a standing obligation.

You could compare the neighbor's original visit with a brief lunch visit. What does each ask Rafi to do? Which better fits the company he wanted? Neither needs to be the answer for every person with depression.

Some people have little dependable support. A clearer request cannot create someone else's time or willingness. Clinical care, community services, or help locating practical assistance may be needed. The absence of suitable help should not be interpreted as a failure to ask correctly.

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Rafi wants company that leaves him enough room to be as tired as he is.

Imagine company that can tolerate the quiet when you run out of things to say. What would you need from the person sitting there?

Companion reading · When Life Becomes Hard to Reach

Full pathway companion · included with paid learning
Pathway introduction: Depression, Motivation, and Recovering Agency (public introduction; full modules require access).

Sources and further reading

[1] Fosha, D. (2021). Introduction: AEDP after 20 years. In D. Fosha (Ed.), Undoing Aloneness and the Transformation of Suffering Into Flourishing: AEDP 2.0 (pp. 3–23). American Psychological Association. Source.

[2] Bandura, A. (2001). Social cognitive theory: An agentic perspective. Annual Review of Psychology, 52, 1–26. Source.

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