

## Opinion: When our friends cry for help

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An Eeyore stuffed animal. File photo

“There’s a lot going on.”

When people say that, especially in a measured, calm tone, it often means trouble. Usually, it’s the kind of concern he or she can’t, won’t or shouldn’t elaborate on. Whatever’s “going on” is all-consuming to them. It’s the time they most need a friend, relative or therapist.

Some subjects are just taboo for many, even in 2023. The specifics of financial problems are avoided even with the closest of friends because the topic is humiliating, shameful or invites judgment. Parents, similarly, rarely talk about the character defects of their children. They are more likely to blame teachers, the pandemic or other externals rather than share worries about their kids’ inherent traits. Yes, we all have “a lot going on.”

Conversations usually center on what you've done, where, when and with whom. Personal burdens are made worse by the isolation caused by "keeping up a good front," pretending we're busy but fine. As a therapist, I probe. As a friend, I am more cautious.

Sometimes, we feel that folks have used up their complaint chips. They are negative by nature, experience or habit, and want sympathy for their woes, which seem not much worse than anyone's. Some people just have bad luck that doesn't quit. A friend lost her father, then her adult son, her mother, and developed breast cancer, and needed knee surgery — all within the space of a few years. She did have "a lot going on." A client found his wife planning a rendezvous with an old flame.

When I won't, can't or shouldn't share my private worries, am I doing the right thing? Doesn't shared vulnerability create intimacy and reflect trust, honoring the recipient? Does the issue grow larger simply by staying unmentionable? Do I, too, put the potential fallout ahead of my own well-being? Am I self-important? Afraid? Hopeless?

If I don't probe a close friend, who is obfuscating, who am I helping? Myself, by not taking on their burdens? Them, by distracting them from their unspoken troubles? Both of us? Neither of us? When I delay with someone professionally, it's a reasoned and intuitive judgment call, based on choosing the best timing for it.

Support groups can make all the difference. In the 12-step "rooms" many people find they gather strength from those who have walked a similar path. The success for many is undeniable. Yet no one is expected to "fix" someone else's issue. There, one simply bears witness to the story, gaining strength from the connection to positive role models.

It helps to set boundaries. How much can I take on? Too much or too many simultaneously wear me down. I have a friend akin to Pooh's buddy Eeyore whose favorite answer was a mournful, "Oh bother..." This recalls Samuel Becket's monumental, tragic, existentially frightening play "Waiting for Godot," in which the main character responds only with "Nothing to be done," The famous poem by T.S. Eliot, "The Hollow Men," reflects, "This is the way the world ends, this is the way the world ends. Not with a bang, but a whimper."

As we begin 2023, we do have “a lot going on.” We can straddle the line between Pollyanna and Eeyore. Let’s balance the amount of others’ angst we digest, seek more downtime with friends who bring joy. Probe when appropriate. Then, perhaps, the overbooked offices of mental health workers would become a bit more accessible when we truly need them.

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