

Supporting Someone During Difficult Tics

What helps and what can make things harder

There may be times when a person's tics become intense, painful, exhausting or difficult to manage alongside everything else happening around them. The most helpful response is rarely to make the tic the centre of attention. Support begins with staying calm, reducing unnecessary pressure and listening to what the person says they need. Different people need different things, and the same person may want space on one occasion and quiet company on another.

Start with calm, not alarm

Seeing a forceful or sudden tic can be worrying, particularly for somebody who has not seen it before. Try to keep your voice and body language calm. Repeatedly asking whether the person is all right, staring, gathering people around them or reacting with panic can increase pressure and self-consciousness. If the person is able to communicate, ask one simple question about what would help and follow their lead.

Support the person, not the performance of looking 'normal'.

Reduce demands

When tics are intense, ordinary demands can become harder. Conversation, decision-making, schoolwork, work tasks, travelling or being expected to sit still may add to the strain. Where possible, reduce non-essential demands temporarily. Give the person time to recover rather than immediately expecting them to return to full activity.

Give space without abandoning

Some people want privacy when tics are difficult. Others feel safer knowing somebody trusted is nearby. Giving space does not have to mean leaving without checking. You might ask, 'Would you like me to stay, sit nearby or give you some privacy?' Respect the answer where it is safe to do so.

Do not repeatedly tell someone to stop

Tics are involuntary. Asking someone to stop, calm down, control themselves or try harder can add shame and frustration. Some people can suppress a tic temporarily, but suppression may require considerable effort and can make the internal urge uncomfortable. A person should not have to suppress simply to make supporters feel more comfortable.

Avoid unnecessary restraint

Ordinary tics should not be physically restrained simply because they look unusual or dramatic. Holding somebody's limbs or body can increase distress and may create additional risk. If there is an immediate danger of injury, focus on making the environment safer and follow any individual clinical or emergency plan the person has. Severe or unfamiliar events should be medically assessed rather than automatically assumed to be Tourette syndrome.

Pain and injury matter

Repeated or forceful tics can cause muscle soreness, headaches or injury for some people. Ask about pain rather than assuming the person is used to it. Practical support may include rest, reducing physical demands and seeking appropriate healthcare advice when pain or injury is significant or persistent. New neurological symptoms, loss of consciousness, breathing difficulty, serious injury or another medical emergency require urgent assessment.

Remove hazards where possible

If movements are forceful, quietly move breakable, sharp or dangerous objects out of the immediate area if this can be done safely. Give the person enough physical room. Avoid surrounding them with people. If they have a known safety plan, use it.

Sensory load can matter

Noise, bright light, crowds, touch and multiple people talking can add to an already demanding moment. Some people benefit from a quieter space, lower lighting, fewer questions or reduced sensory input. Do not assume sensory support will help everyone; ask whenever possible.

What about tic attacks?

Some people with Tourette syndrome experience episodes commonly described as tic attacks, involving bouts of severe, continuous or difficult-to-control tic-like movements. These episodes can be frightening and may differ from the person's usual tics. An individual plan developed with appropriate healthcare professionals can help families, schools or workplaces know how to respond. A first, unusual, severe or medically concerning episode should not simply be labelled a tic attack without appropriate assessment.

After a difficult period

Recovery can take time. The person may feel physically sore, emotionally drained, embarrassed or simply tired. Avoid immediately analysing what happened unless they want to talk. Offer water, rest, privacy, quiet or practical help as appropriate. Later, when things are settled, it may be useful to ask what helped and what they would like supporters to do differently next time.

Helpful responses

Instead of...	Try...
"Stop, you're going to hurt yourself."	"What would help you feel safer right now?"
"Calm down."	"I'm here. We can reduce what's happening around you."
"Everyone needs to give you space."	"Would you like company or some space?"
"Try to control the tics."	"You do not need to suppress them for me."

Make a support plan before it is needed

When difficult episodes are recurring, a short personal plan can record what the person's usual tics look like, what signs suggest they need a break, preferred communication, whether they want touch or no touch, helpful sensory changes, known injury risks, who to contact, and what circumstances require medical help. The person should be involved in the plan as much as possible.

A message

You do not need somebody to fix you while your body is having a difficult time. You need people who can stay steady, listen and make the space around you safer. Your difficult tics are not a failure and they are not something you need to apologise for. Support can be quiet. Sometimes it is simply another person showing you, through their actions, that you are still safe, respected and not alone.

UK information and support

NHS information covers Tourette syndrome, tics and treatment. Tourette's Action provides UK information and resources for people with Tourette syndrome, families, schools and workplaces, including information about tic attacks and managing difficult tics.

Sources

NHS: Tourette syndrome; Tics; Tics - Treatment (accessed September 2026). Tourette's Action: Tourette syndrome information and resources, including tic attacks (accessed September 2026). This resource provides general support information and is not a substitute for individual medical assessment, emergency care or a personalised clinical plan.