

How do I help my friend?

6 tips on helping a friend.

When a friend tells you – or just shows you but doesn't tell you - that they are not coping, are really upset and worried, or are clearly suffering, you might feel pretty mixed up too. You might feel really worried about them, or annoyed that they aren't dealing with it, or scared about what might happen, or just confused e.g. by changes in their behaviour or attitude.

The following **6 tips are based on people's personal experiences** of talking about mental health problems with friends, and I hope they will be useful to you in managing your friendship and working out what counts for you as a reasonable expectation of the kind of support you can offer.

College counsellors can also help.

Catherine and I are the college counsellors and we are always willing to talk to people who are concerned about a friend and will offer practical advice. These conversations are completely confidential. We will not tell people about your concern, or take any action that would identify you as the source of information.

1. Look after yourself

It may seem surprising to start with this but first and foremost, you need to look after yourself. This means that you must give yourself permission to know your limits and to remember that your primary goal is to read for your degree. One way in which we look after ourselves is to set limits on the amount of time – or the timing – you are prepared to give to your friend. People often get afraid that if we set conditions on this, our friend might feel even more rejected or that they might do something serious to harm themselves. Many people have strong caring natures and a sense of responsibility towards the wellbeing of others – but this can lead to losing sight of your own needs, getting ill yourself, or even falling out with your friend when their needs become onerous. This is why it is important not to feel that you are the SOLE support for your friend and that you get help for yourself if it feels like that is happening, or that you help your friend to identify other sources of support they are willing to access.

- ➔ It really is ok (safe) to say to your friend that you aren't able to support them right precisely at that moment and to negotiate another time. "I'm going to be reading for my essay for the next hour but how about we meet for about 10 minutes after that?" This also applies to texts and social network messaging, especially late at night.
- ➔ If you are getting really stressed out, get support for yourself from the welfare network in college: peer supporters, college nurse, personal tutor, tutor-counsellor and counsellor, welfare officers (we all work confidentially).
- ➔ Sometimes we may feel that the kind of support someone needs is well beyond our capacity. It's better to be up front with your friend and say so – "Look, I'm your friend and will go on being your friend, but I really don't feel I'm the right person for you in this. Let's think about where else or who else you might go to?" It's OK (safe)

to tell your friend if you don't feel you are able to give them the kind of support they're looking for - you can offer to talk over with them where else they might get what they need or you might make an offer to meet later to do something ordinary like go for a walk or a coffee; you might offer to talk to someone else on their behalf (with their permission).

→ It's ok to set time limits if you have to go and study or need to have time to yourself.

Being a great friend also means remembering to care for yourself first so that you can be strong when your friend really needs you.

2. Ignore myths

There are a lot of myths and whispers in the media that get passed around about mental health. If you are interested, there is nothing shameful about reading up and learning from reliable sources what is really involved when you suspect someone has a mental health problem. Being well informed e.g. about self-harming or eating difficulties or depression can help you give the right kind of support for your friend and offer some real empathy and understanding.

But do make sure you are using reliable sources of information if you go on the internet. And you can always come and talk to the college nurse or the tutor-counsellor in confidence, if you want to know more about mental health disorders such as eating difficulties, self harm, depression etc. There are also excellent self-help leaflets free and online on the University Counselling Service website and suggestions for further reading.

3. Listen

Really listening to your friend and hearing what they are saying without over reacting, interrupting or judging is probably the most important support you can give. Being a caring, non-judgemental, friendly, witness to a person's grief or trouble is what many people who are suffering say they want. They say "I didn't expect them to know the answers, or to give advice. It was just that they were there and weren't bored or fed up with me, they didn't just go away or say 'that's your problem, deal with it'."

You might feel really tempted to give advice from your own experience, to want to step in and fix their problems or offer a solution to what they are struggling with, but often it is better just to offer a shoulder to cry on. Your friend will appreciate you saying, "I am here right now and I really want to hear about what's upsetting you," rather than "You need to..." Advice is not always what the person is looking for. It is genuinely good enough just to offer your listening ears and to allow your friend the space to express him- or herself.

4. Don't interrogate! Limit the number of questions about 'the facts'.

Because you do care for your friend, you're bound to have questions that you want to ask them about why they are upset. Your friend probably won't be able to answer them because their feelings are often as bewildering to them as they are to you. Or trying to answer those questions is what they have been doing every night and day for weeks and they're exhausted. So, just ask enough to help you understand, but not so much that it gets intrusive (i.e. more about satisfying your curiosity

than about what they want to tell you). They may not want to tell you a lot, and may need to take their time about what they want to share, so let them take the lead.

5. Respect the friend's courage

Remember that your friend may be talking about very personal things and will have had to have been pretty brave to open up to you. It takes a lot of courage to stand up and tell someone you are not coping, or are feeling really bad emotionally, even to your closest friends. Your friend might be worried that you will despise their weakness as they see it, or will feel they are burdening you and that you are secretly judging or pitying them. Despite these fears, most of us know and feel it's a privilege when someone shares intimate details of their life, so we have to treat those disclosures carefully and gently and let our friends know they can trust us not to casually share information through gossiping or carelessness, or give insensitive responses. But please seek support if you are feeling over-burdened by a friend's need.

6. Hang on in there

Your friend may be spending more time alone – and cutting themselves off from you - and that may feel hurtful, and make you feel angry and rejected. They might be prickly and defensive, or tearful all the time, or you might feel that a friendship that was once fun and interesting is changing and you don't know if it's something you've said or done. These are not easy feelings to have but it can help to remember that your friend is still the person you liked, even when they are struggling. Not giving up on them can mean a lot to people with depression, for example – they mostly know that their depression makes things difficult for other people too. But remember – you must give yourself permission to know your limits and even to accept that a friendship isn't working out for either of you.

6. Seek Support

It's important to keep your friend's personal issues confidential but if you have serious concerns, especially about your friend's survival or the welfare of other people, you **must** speak to a member of the College staff or Welfare team.

Equally, if you're feeling troubled yourself or if supporting your friend is getting you down, it's ok to let people in the College know, to take some time for yourself and to talk to someone. Your friendship is important but so are you. Your primary purpose is to study and to pass your exams.

Learning that someone you care about is going through a difficult time, mentally, is always tough, whether it is a friend or a family member. It isn't always easy to support someone that you are close to but remember that it's understandable if sometimes it gets you down. Offering someone compassion and friendship when they are at their lowest is a brave and kind thing to do; but know your limits and don't hesitate to seek support if you need it.