

How Do I Help My Friend When They Are Struggling With Mental Health Issues?

There is almost nothing more important than friendships. Sometimes, we see our friends feeling stressed, sad, anxious and alone. This is completely normal. There is the possibility that your friend may seem to change and sometimes quickly. Your friend may begin to behave differently, think differently, perhaps even dress differently. You then realize that your friend may be going through something really challenging. You may think, “What am I supposed to do?”

Do you listen to your friend? Do you know what to say?

How do you know when it's time to contact an adult for help without breaking the trust of your friend, especially when your friend begs you to keep their situation a secret?

First, here are some things you might notice in your friend who is struggling with a mental health condition.

- 1. You may notice that your friend doesn't seem like themselves.** For example, your friend may have low energy or motivation. They may feel hopeless and/or helpless, feel trapped with a sense that there is no way out, or they may feel like there is no reason to live or they have no sense of purpose.
- 2. There may be dramatic changes in behaviour or emotions.** Your friend may seem to have sudden changes in mood, such as more sadness and/or crying. They may not do well in school, and you may notice changes in their eating or sleeping patterns. They may be more emotional than usual, expressing strong anger and worry. Your friend may avoid family and friends as well as social situations. They may not do the things they usually like to do.
- 3. Importantly, you may notice your friend looking for ways to harm themselves.** Your friend may not act like themselves, they could be starting fights, stealing, and/or getting into trouble.



How Do You Help Your Friend Who Has a Mental Health Condition?

There is no reason to be afraid to have a talk with your friend. Find a place that's quiet where you and your friend can relax. Listen to your friend. Showing that you care can really help. Maybe you can ask, "Is there anything you want to talk about? You haven't seemed yourself lately."

Then, it is important to show your friend you believe what they are saying. There is no need to pretend that you feel the exact same way as them. Listen without judgment. You could say, "that sounds hard" - this can be really helpful. Show them you are listening and respond to them. Your friend is sharing with you how they feel. Always take them seriously.

Remember, **not all of your conversations need to be about your friend's mental health**, so bring up different topics once in a while. Also, getting your friend to participate in energizing, or fun activities, is a great way to support your friend and boost their mood.

Your friend may not want to hang out all of the time, but keep asking. This shows that you care and that you like hanging out with them. Also, if a friend tells you something secret, respect your friend's trust and don't share more than they would want. That is, do not gossip. Check in with them frequently, this shows that you are still there for them no matter what.

If you see signs of a possible emergency, get your friend help right away. Try to stay calm and talk to your friend in a respectful and caring way. Ask how you can help. If your friend tells you that they are not feeling ok, tell them it would be good to reach out for help. Offer to get help together if they are struggling to express themselves. Try getting your friend to talk with a parent, teacher or a counsellor. If your friend becomes angry, stressed, or aggressive, it might be best to walk away and call for an adult to help right away.



However, sometimes a friend in crisis will have problems talking about how they feel. Simply listen as best as you can to understand what they are saying. Do not tell your friend to “move on” or “get over it.” Dealing with a mental health condition can take a lot of time and you must stay patient.

When to Tell an Adult

If you think your friend is having a mental health emergency, this needs to be taken seriously and a responsible, trusted adult needs to be involved. If your friend is telling you some intense stuff, it can be tricky to know when it might be time to talk to an adult for help. If you talk openly to your friend, ask with whom they feel most comfortable. For example, it can be a parent, trusted family member, or a school counsellor.

A few signs to know when it's time to turn to an adult:

1. If your friend is hurting themselves.
2. If your friend is talking about hurting themselves.
3. If your friend is showing signs they might hurt others.
4. If you think your friend has developed an eating disorder. This is urgent, as eating disorders are a serious health threat to their wellbeing.
5. If your friend seems to be experiencing a psychotic break. That is, if they are hallucinating (seeing or hearing things that are not there) or having delusions (false or unrealistic beliefs). If so, your friend needs help immediately.
6. If your friend is relying on substances (like drugs or alcohol) to cope with how they're feeling.



How to Get Help Without Betraying Your Friend to the Best of Your Ability

Helping a friend is all about **openness and honesty**. It makes sense that the fear of betraying your friend might prevent you from seeking help, especially if they are sharing sensitive information.

You can start by sharing with them why you feel it is time to bring an adult into the conversation. **The most important thing is that it is because you care so much about them.** Then, you could offer to be there for the conversation with the adult to show your support.

Now, it can be very tricky if your friend with a mental health condition clearly asks you NOT to tell an adult – even after you have explained why it's important to do so. You could try to explain the reasons why getting support from an adult is a good idea. If your friend continues to refuse, you may need to tell an adult yourself – without your friend telling you it is OK. Of course you want to keep the friendship, but in the end, your friend's safety and well-being have to come first. Remind yourself that it makes sense to feel worried about your friend's reaction to you telling an adult. Remember that you are doing what is best for your friend, for yourself, and your friendship.

Once your friend is with a responsible and trusted adult getting support, it's important to give your friend some space so they can get the help they need. Then you might want to reach out to your friend again. Though your friend might have been angry with you at first, usually with time, they will realize that **you told an adult out of love and great concern for them.**



Boundaries

Boundaries are so important, as **it's easy for your friend's problems to take over your mind**. You can't be there for your friend 24/7. You can't put yourself in danger to help your friend. You don't need to feel guilty if things are in fact going well for you and not for them.

Importantly, of course, you don't need to stay in a friendship that is no longer working for you. Why all these suggestions? **Because you are NEVER totally responsible for another person's mental health**, even if they are your best friend. That is what therapists and psychiatrists are for, people who are specifically trained to help people with mental health conditions.

You may want to "fix" things for your friend. **But remember the power of simply being present for them**. If your friend is not ready for help, knowing that you are there is powerful. Try to be patient and respectful, and let your friend know that you are there for them when they, at some point, feel comfortable to talk about it. Again, if your friend says they are going to hurt themselves, that they feel hopeless, or hurt somebody else, or becomes agitated and aggressive, you need to tell an adult immediately such as a parent, trusted family member and/or a school counsellor.

Be careful not to take on your friend's problems as well, which can happen. It can be hard to listen to your friend's problems all the time. For this reason, it is very important that you take care of yourself. If you notice that you have symptoms of anxiety, depression, or you're withdrawing from activities you usually enjoy, or even thinking of harming yourself, then it's really important you get professional help for yourself. **There is absolutely nothing wrong with this**. You can speak to a counsellor or a therapist who can give you the coping skills you need for your situation. You can also try talking to your parents. In the end it's important to be a good friend, but if you're not taking care of yourself it's hard to care for anyone else.

