

Helping a Friend in Trouble



“Walking with a friend in the dark is better than walking alone in the light.”

Helen Keller

“Don’t walk behind me; I may not lead. Don’t walk in front of me; I may not follow. Just walk beside me and be my friend.”

Albert Camus

“Too often we underestimate the power of a touch, a smile, a kind word, a listening ear, an honest compliment, or the smallest act of caring, all of which have the potential to turn a life around.”

Leo Buscaglia

Friendships enrich our lives in so many ways. They bring laughter and shared experiences; friends are the people who know our flaws and love us anyway, and they are the people we turn to when life is tough. As we go through major life events and changes it is our friends who are there to witness, cheering us along or commiserating depending on the circumstances – passing exams, getting the dream job, relationship break-ups, births, marriages, illness and losses. In turbulent times a good friend can be the anchor that steadies the ship, the person that we can be honest with about how things really are and how we really feel. Whilst being a good friend has its own rewards it is difficult when we perceive that a person dear to us is struggling or facing troubling circumstances. We want to help but worry about saying the right thing, fearing that we could upset them further or cause offence. We want to be available for them whilst respecting their need for space.

In this helpsheet we will look at how to deal with these concerns and offer some guidelines on how to help a friend in distress. If there is anything in this helpsheet that you would like to discuss further you can speak with one of our trained therapists on the Adviceline.

When a friend is in trouble

A friendship can span a lifetime or it can be limited to a particular period of our lives. As humans we are constantly adapting to life events, learning and evolving, in other words, we change. We are not the same person at the age of 21 as we are at the age of 41 or 61 and so on. Naturally some friendships endure and some do not; we make new friends who are more in tune with us.

Then there are the times when the changes in our friends are more worrying, less like adapting and evolving and more like struggling. It may be a difference in their behaviour, overall mood, values or personality as a whole.

Events like bereavement, work stress, bullying, chronic or life-threatening illness, breakdowns in relationships, caring responsibilities, financial hardship, under-achieving, traumatic experiences like road traffic accidents, abuse or loneliness can deeply affect the way a person experiences the world and responds to those around them.

Signs that a friend might be struggling are:

- heightened feelings such as anger, sadness or despair.
- withdrawn and isolated or manic and impulsive.
- changes in appearance such as weight loss or gain, appearing tired or unwell.
- reliance on unhealthy ways of coping - drinking, smoking, substance use, escaping into TV or online, risky sexual behaviour, eating more or less.
- loss of confidence, lower self-esteem.
- persistent worrying.
- a sense of hopelessness about the future.

What can you do to help?

Offer a listening Ear

One of the most powerful gifts that you can offer a friend is a listening ear. According to bestselling author Steven Covey 'most people do not listen with the intent to understand; they listen with the intent to reply.' Yet when we listen with empathy it allows our friends to express themselves fully and have those feelings acknowledged. Empathy is simply the ability to understand a person's condition from their own perspective. Therapists and psychotherapists have long understood the innate need people have to tell their stories and be heard, and recognise how this can help to lighten the load or make difficult feelings more bearable. It may not change the circumstances but it prevents someone from feeling that they are dealing with it on their own.

Empathic listening does not require you to agree with the other, simply to understand emotionally as well as intellectually. It is more of a right-brained, intuitive focus. This can be difficult for people whose natural inclination is to try to fix a problem, or offer advice, but if you can withhold these instincts – unless the person clearly asks for this type of help – you will give them something more valuable.



Avoid Judging

You may not approve of your friend's choices but criticising and judging them won't help. If a person realises they have made poor choices they often experience feelings of shame and these feelings are difficult to tolerate. Shame can cause a person to beat themselves up, telling themselves that they were stupid or selfish to conduct themselves in such a way. If we allow ourselves to ruminate on our shame, or we feel criticised, we may experience lower self-esteem and, in some instances, this can lead to depression. Yet shame plays an important role in showing us which behaviours or choices contravene our moral code or values; it also reminds us that there is a better way of doing things. With conscious attention we become re-aligned with what we believe is important in life and can make better choices in the future.

As a friend the best thing we can do for a friend who is experiencing shame is to be understanding. Although we may not have agreed with their decisions or behaviour they had their reasons for making them. Once they feel understood we can gently help and support them to make the positive changes they know are necessary.

When you judge your friend you risk isolating them, and they are more likely to shut down the possibility of talking further.



Avoid saying 'I told you so'

Saying 'I told you so' might make you feel better but it will make your friend feel worse. You may have predicted that their latest partner would let them down, that their poor lifestyle choices would lead to illness or that their reckless spending would catch up with them but when the crisis hits your friend won't thank you reminding them of this.

Giving Advice

When a friend is in trouble and we think we know what will help we understandably want to share our suggestions. However, when you offer advice it implies that you think you know best and this can cause resentment. What might be right for ourselves may not be right for our friend. People need time to process their difficulties and do their own problem solving.

Sometimes advice will be welcomed but check first to see if your friend is interested in hearing it. If not, you may have to accept that they will proceed their own way.

Offer a Safe Place

In the middle of a storm what can really help is a safe place. A safe place could mean somewhere a person feels able to let their guard down, or remove their 'game-face' and tell it how it really is, or it could literally mean a safe place if a friend is in danger of being harmed and needs to leave their home.

Don't be an Enabler

The term enabler is often used in connection with addicts. An enabler makes it easier for the addict to continue their self-destructive behaviours in various ways such as bailing them out of prison, lying about their drinking, or giving money for their habits. When people are under strain they are more likely to take on unhealthy coping strategies like bingeing on alcohol. If these behaviours persist they will perpetuate the problems and prevent the person from moving on. When you go along with the maladaptive behaviours and enable them you become part of the problem.

Don't minimise

Telling people to 'cheer up' or that 'everything will be ok' when you can't predict the future is unhelpful. This can be particularly difficult to hear for people who have depression, as part of the illness is that they feel unable to cheer up or experience happiness.

Practical support

Offer practical support where appropriate. For instance, taking round a home cooked meal to someone who is unwell or offering to babysit the children of an overwhelmed parent can help to ease the strain.

How to discuss difficult issues

If you are unsure how to talk about difficulties with a friend here are some suggestions:

I've noticed that you haven't been acting like yourself lately. I'm worried about you, is something going on?

How long have you been feeling this way?

How can I help?

Have you spoken with anyone else about this?

Have you ever had thoughts about hurting yourself?

It makes me afraid to hear you talk about dying. Can we talk to someone about this?

Can I help you find someone to see about your concerns?

Things you can say to help:

You are not alone. I'm here for you.

You may not believe it now but your feelings can change.

I may not be able to understand all that you are going through but I care about you and want to help.



If you are worried about suicide

Many people say that they wish they weren't here when they are distressed and this often signifies a wish to escape their problems rather than an intention to end their life. Suicide is a desperate attempt to escape suffering that has become unbearable. If somebody is feeling actively suicidal you may notice them talking more frequently about death, or expressing a wish to take their life. They may show hopelessness, and have a bleak vision of the future. Other factors to be concerned about are dramatic mood swings or changes in behaviour.

To find out if a person is at serious risk of taking their life find out:

- Do they have a suicide plan? **PLAN**
- Do they have what they need to carry out their plan (pills, lethal objects etc)? **MEANS**
- Do they know when they would do it? **TIME SET**
- Do they intend to commit suicide? **INTENTION**



By asking about suicide you are not planting ideas, you are finding out what is going on. You can help in a number of ways:

- Encourage them to get professional help. They could see a psychotherapist, FBT therapist or make an appointment with their GP. You could offer to help them find someone, or book a GP appointment for them.
- Encourage them to look after themselves by eating well, getting sufficient rest and exercising.
- If you think there is an immediate suicide risk you should stay with them and encourage them to do one of the following:
 - call the Samaritans.
 - contact their GP or out of hours emergency service.
 - dial 999 or NHS Direct on 111.
 - go to the nearest Accident and Emergency (A&E) department.
- If you believe there is an immediate risk and the person will not seek help you can contact social services or your GP. Under the Mental Health Act a person can be treated without their consent, meaning they can be sectioned. This can be a heavy responsibility and a difficult decision to make; if you wish to know more you can read Mind's Guide to the Mental Health Act (details at the end of this helpsheet).

Further Resources

Mind, the Mental Health Charity
www.mind.org.uk

Information and support regarding mental health issues, including an A-Z information directory and a downloadable pdf about the Mental Health Act 1983

Samaritans
www.samaritans.org

Tel: 116 123
Email: jo@samaritans.org

United Kingdom Council for Psychotherapy (UKCP)
www.ukcp.org.uk

British Association for Therapy and Psychotherapy
www.bacp.co.uk

Further help and information

CiC – Supporting Organisations
www.well-online.co.uk

24-hour Confidential Care Adviceline, providing emotional and practical support.

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