

HOW to help a friend

A GUIDE FOR PENN STUDENTS

College friends learn together how to deal successfully with stressors often associated with college life, such as balancing academic work loads and extra-curricular activities, developing a personal identity away from home, being introduced to new cultures and ideas, etc. They also see each other through difficult times, like the break-up of a relationship and dealing with family concerns back home. This brochure will provide some general guidelines to keep in mind when helping your friends through difficult times.

When To Be Concerned About A Friend

At one time or another, everyone feels depressed or upset. When symptoms of distress are persistent over a long period of time or when they interfere with academic responsibilities and social relationships, it may be a cause for concern. Following is a list of signs and symptoms that may indicate that your friend needs help.

Physical or Psychological Signs

- Deterioration in physical presence or hygiene.
- Excessive fatigue or sleep difficulties.
- Visible increase or decrease in weight.
- Exaggerated personality traits or behaviors (e.g. agitation, withdrawal, lack of apparent emotion).
- Excessive use of alcohol or other drugs.
- Unprovoked anger or hostility.
- Irritability, constant anxiety or tearfulness.
- Marked changes in concentration and motivation.
- Overtly suicidal thoughts, such as referring to suicide as a current option.
- Frequently missing classes.

Other Factors to Consider

- Direct statements indicating family problems, personal losses such as death of a family member, or the break up of a relationship.
- Expressions of concern about a student by faculty or staff members.
- Written note or verbal statement that has a sense of hopelessness or finality.

Things You Can Do To Help A Friend

Whether friends approach you about a problem they are having or you want to approach them about something that bothers you, keep in mind the following important general guidelines when you are helping a friend.

Find a **place** that is private and comfortable. People are usually more receptive to being helped and will listen more to what you have to say when nobody else is around. Also make sure both of you have the time and are not rushed or preoccupied.

If you are concerned, **be specific** about why you are concerned. Tell your friend what you have observed recently, such as him or her eating less, missing classes, not attending floor meetings, sleeping too much or too little, etc. Sticking with specific observations may make your concerns easier to communicate.

Listen. People who are in need benefit most from a friend who actively listens to their concerns. Do not rush to fix, advise, correct, or disagree with your friend; just listen. While being an active listener, look at your friend directly, ask him or her to clarify things you do not understand, summarize what your friend says to you in order to be sure there is mutual understanding, and ask questions to help your friend take a closer look at what he or she is saying. Once you have listened to your friend and he or she feels understood by you, your friend will likely be more receptive to hearing your ideas and advice.

Validate. Understand and acknowledge your friend's current distressing situation and how your friend feels about the situation. Validation often calms people because they no longer have to convince the listener that they have a problem that is serious to them. Therefore, do not say things such as, "Don't worry about it," or "Everything will be better tomorrow."

Avoid judging, evaluating, and criticizing, even if the student asks your opinion. These behaviors will likely push your friend away. Remember to see your friend's distressing situation from his or her perspective.

Develop **options.** Brainstorm with your friend about possible ways of resolving the issue and suggest various resources to obtain further help, such as friends, family, clergy, RAs/GAs, or professionals on campus. This can assure the student that things can get better and things will not always seem hopeless.

Respect your friend's wishes but don't make promises you can't keep because you may need to talk to a professional about your concerns.

Know Your Limitations

There may be situations where outside help is needed. Good examples of such situations include, but are not limited to:

- When your friend expresses thoughts or desires to hurt himself or herself or someone else.
- If your friend has been acting differently than usual, such as not engaging in their typical activities and appearing depressed, agitated, and anxious.
- You sense that something is wrong.

When in doubt, **consult** with a professional to help or to discuss the appropriateness of your intervention. There are professionals on campus that you can turn to when these situations arise, and when you feel overwhelmed and become involved beyond what seems comfortable and appropriate. These individuals include your House Dean, RA/GA, and a Counseling and Psychological Services (CAPS) counselor. It is important that you realize you are indeed helping your friend by getting these individuals involved because it requires their knowledge and experience.

Remember to **take care of yourself**. Your role is to provide support; it is not to be a hero. In your desire to show a friend you care, you may begin feeling stressed because you are taking on too much responsibility and placing more effort than necessary. It is vital that you attend to your own needs. Do not let the situation cause you to start doing poorly in school, have health problems, or take basic enjoyment out of your own life. Remember that a CAPS clinician is available to you in person or by phone.

Making A Referral To CAPS

Your friend may be struggling with issues that can best be resolved by having your friend talk to a counselor. Therefore, suggesting counseling to your friend can often times be the best thing you can do for your friend. Here are some suggestions on how to refer someone you care for to counseling at CAPS.

- Assure your friend that resolving the issue through counseling, facing oneself, and acknowledging one's limitation are all signs of **strength and courage**, rather than signs of weakness or failure.
- **Share** your own positive counseling experiences, if applicable.
- Offer to **walk** with your friend to CAPS or CALL CAPS together to schedule an initial appointment.

Information About CAPS

- CAPS is confidential. This means that information shared in counseling cannot be released to other Penn offices, family members, professors, etc. without your friend's written permission (the exception being if the student is in danger of harming himself or herself or others).
- CAPS services are free.
- The first meeting is simply an intake (consultation) session where the counselor listens to your friend's concerns and then helps your friend access the most appropriate services, either at CAPS or nearby, to address his or her concerns.
- If you or your friend feel that the problem is urgent and cannot wait until the next appointment, walk in hours are available 9 a.m. - 5 p.m. weekdays.

Counseling and Psychological Services

133 South 36th Street, Second Floor
(Corner of 36th and Walnut Streets)
Philadelphia, PA 19104-3246

Monday - Friday, 9:00 AM - 5:00 PM
215-898-7021

After Hour Emergencies:
215-349-5490
(Ask for the CAPS Clinician on Call)

<http://dolphin.upenn.edu/~caps/>



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