THINGS YOU can do TO HELP A FRIEND

A GUIDE FOR PENN STUDENTS

College friends have come together to deal successfully with balancing academic and extracurricular stress, developing independence, and experiencing new people, cultures, and ideas. Friends help each other through difficult times like break-ups or family tragedies.

WHEN TO BE CONCERNED ABOUT A FRIEND

Everyone feels depressed or upset at one time or another. But when distress persists and interferes with school or social life, there may be cause for concern.

PHYSICAL OR PSYCHOLOGICAL SIGNS

YOUR FRIEND MAY NEED HELP

1. Overly sad or withdraws from social situations
2. Unexplained anger or hostility
3. Irritability, constant anxiety or tearfulness
4. Determination in physical presence or hygiene
5. Visible increase or decrease in weight
6. Excessive use of alcohol or other drugs
7. Enlarged organs or difficulty sleeping
8. Exaggerated personality traits or behaviors (agitation, withdrawal)
9. Marked changes in concentration and motivation
10. Loss of interest in previously enjoyed activities

OTHER FACTORS TO CONSIDER

1. Writs notes or verbal statement that he has thought about suicide
2. Direct statements indicating family problems or personal losses (such as death, a family member, financial problems, or a break-up)
3. Expressions of concern about a friend by family, staff members, or other classmates

THINGS YOU can do TO HELP A FRIEND

VALIDATE. Understand, repeat, and acknowledge your friend’s distress and feelings. Validation often calms people because they no longer have to convince the listener that they have a serious problem.

AVOID minimizing your friend’s concerns. Don’t say “Everything will be better” or “Don’t worry.”

RESIST the inclination to judge, evaluate, or criticize, even if your friend asks your opinion. These responses could push your friend away.

TRANSPORT options. After you’ve validated your friend’s problem, work together on resolutions. Suggest resources, such as friends, family, clergy, CAPS, GSA, advisors, or other campus professionals.

RESPECT your friend’s wishes for confidentiality, but don’t make promises you can’t keep. You may need to talk to a professional about your concerns.

KNOW YOUR LIMITATIONS

Recognize situations where you need to contact professional help to help your friend.

Examples include:

1. Your friend expresses thoughts or desires to self-harm or hurt others.
2. Your friend acts differently, withdrawing, becoming depressed, agitated, and anxious.

MAKING A REFERRAL TO CAPS

Suggesting counseling is a way to help your friend.

1. Assure your friend that seeking professional help is a sign of strength and courage.
2. If applicable, share your own counseling experiences.
3. Offer to walk to your friend with CAPS or call CAPS together to set up an initial appointment.

DON’T MANAGE a friend’s stress alone. There are professionals across campus who can help if you feel overwhelmed, fearful, or uncomfortable. Refer a friend to your House Dean, RA, or GA. Call CAPS or the Student Health Service. You will be helping your friend by getting others involved.

Remember to take care of yourself. It’s great to be a supportive friend, but you need not be a hero. Lead your own path! Don’t let helping a friend cause you stress, health problems, or academic difficulties. Call CAPS to talk to a clinician yourself.