How can I help someone else seek help?

Many people experiencing a mental health problem will speak to friends and family before they speak to a health professional, so the support you offer can be really valuable. This page covers:

- What emotional support can I offer?
- What practical support can I offer?
- What can I do if someone doesn't want my help?
- What if they believe things that seem very unusual or scary to me?
- What can I do if it's an emergency?
- How can I look after myself?

If you regularly support someone with a mental health problem you might be considered a carer. See our page on how to cope when supporting someone else for more information.

Under 18? We have information for you on how to support a friend or partner who's struggling

See young people's guides

What emotional support can I offer?

If someone lets you know that they are experiencing difficult thoughts and feelings, it's common to feel like you don't know what to do or say – but you don't need any special training to show someone you care about them. Often just being there for someone and doing small things can be really valuable. For example:

- Listen. Simply giving someone space to talk, and listening to how they're feeling, can be really helpful in itself. If they're finding it difficult, let them know that you're there when they are ready.
- Offer reassurance. Seeking help can feel lonely, and sometimes scary. You can reassure someone by letting them know that they are not alone, and that you will be there to help.
- Stay calm. Even though it might be upsetting to hear that someone you care about is distressed, try to stay calm. This will help your friend or family member feel calmer too, and show them that they can talk to you openly without upsetting you.
- Be patient. You might want to know more details about their thoughts and feelings, or want them to get help immediately. But it's important to let them set the pace for seeking support themselves.
- Try not to make assumptions. Your perspective might be useful to your friend or family member, but try not to assume that you already know what may have caused their feelings, or what will help.
- Keep social contact. Part of the emotional support you offer could be to keep things as normal as possible. This could include involving your friend or family member in social events, or chatting about other parts of your lives.

I had one friend who helped me by just listening and never judging. Without him my recovery time would have been much longer.

What practical support can I offer?

There are lots of practical things you can do to support someone who is ready to seek help. For example:

- Look for information that might be helpful. When someone is seeking help they may feel worried about making the right choice, or feel that they have no control over their situation. Our page on making yourself heard will give you some ideas on what research you can do, and ways you can help someone think about what might work for them.
- Help to write down lists of questions that the person you're supporting wants to ask their doctor, or help to put points into an order that makes sense (for example, most important point first).
- Help to organise paperwork, for example making sure that your friend or family member has somewhere safe to keep their notes, prescriptions and records of appointments.
- Go to appointments with them, if they want you to – even just being there in the waiting room can help someone feel reassured.
- Ask them if there are any specific practical tasks you could help with, and work on those. For example, this could include:
    - offering them a lift somewhere
    - arranging childcare for them
    - taking over a chore or household task.
- Learn more about the problem they experience, to help you think about other ways you could support them. Our website provides lots of information about different types of mental health problems, including pages on what friends and family can do to help in each case.

What can I do if someone doesn't want my help?

If you feel that someone you care about is clearly struggling but can't or won't reach out for help, and won't accept any help you offer, it's understandable to feel frustrated, distressed and powerless. But it's important to accept that they are an individual, and that there are always limits to what you can do to support another person.

You can:

- Be patient. You won't always know the full story, and there may be reasons why they are finding it difficult to ask for help.
- Offer emotional support and reassurance. Let them know you care about them and you'll be there if they change their mind.

- Inform them how to seek help when they're ready (for example, you could show them our pages on talking to your GP and what might happen at the appointment).
- Look after yourself, and make sure you don't become unwell yourself.

You can't:

- Force someone to talk to you. It can take time for someone to feel able to talk openly, and putting pressure on them to talk might make them feel less comfortable telling you about their experiences.
- Force someone to get help (if they're over 18, and it's not an emergency situation). As adults, we are all ultimately responsible for making our own decisions. This includes when – or if – we choose to seek help when we feel unwell.
- See a doctor for someone else. A doctor might give you general information about symptoms or diagnoses, but they won't be able to share any specific advice or details about someone else without their agreement.

Can you make someone get help with their mental health?

Lucy from Mind's information team answers one of the hardest questions we get on our helpline, 'Can you make someone get help?'

What if they believe things that seem very unusual or scary to me?

If someone is experiencing reality in a very different way from people around them, they may not realise or agree that seeking help could be useful for them. They may be experiencing psychosis, mania, hearing voices or feeling very paranoid. In this case, it can also be helpful to:

- Focus on how their beliefs are making them feel (for example anxious, scared, threatened or confused), as these feelings will be very real.
- Avoid confirming or denying their beliefs. Instead it can help to say something like "I understand that you see things that way, but it's not like that for me."

There are a lot of misunderstandings about what it means to experience psychosis. Lots of people wrongly think that the word 'psychotic' means 'dangerous'. But it's important to remember that in reality, very few people who experience psychosis ever hurt anyone else. (See our page on stigma and misconceptions for more information.)

What can I do if it's an emergency?

There may be times when your friend or family member needs to seek help more urgently, such as if they:

- have harmed themselves and need medical attention
- are having suicidal feelings, and feel they may act on them
- are putting themselves or someone else at immediate, serious risk of harm.

If they are not safe by themselves right now

Stay with them and help them call 999 for an ambulance, if you feel able to do so. Or you could help them get to A&E. They may appreciate it if you can wait with them until they can see a doctor.

If they can keep themselves safe for a little while

You can get quick medical advice by contacting NHS 111 England or NHS 111 Wales. If you call 111, you can select option 2 to access a 24/7 helpline offering urgent mental health support.

Or you could help them make an emergency GP appointment to see a doctor soon.

You can also encourage them to call Samaritans on 116 123 to talk to someone, 24 hours a day. Or you could suggest they try another helpline or listening service.

It may also help to remove things they could use to harm themselves, especially if they have mentioned specific things they might use.

If you or others feel in danger right now

You can call 999 and ask for the police to help. You might feel worried about getting someone in trouble, but it's important to put your own safety first.

If you're not in a situation like this right now, but you're worried someone you care about may experience a mental health crisis in the future, it's a good idea to make a crisis plan with them to work out what steps you will take to help them in an emergency. See our page on planning for a crisis for more information.

How does someone get sectioned?

In exceptional circumstances it's possible to keep a person in hospital under a section of the Mental Health Act (often called being sectioned), and treat them without their agreement. The decision to section someone is very serious, and can only be taken by a team of approved mental health professionals (AMHPs).

If you feel someone is at serious, immediate risk and will not approach anyone for help, you can contact their local social services, who can decide to arrange an assessment (you can usually find the number for social services on the local council's website).

This is a heavy responsibility, so before taking action it's important that you understand what might happen, and what your loved one's rights are. It might also be a good idea to talk this through with someone you trust.

(See our legal pages on sectioning and agreeing to treatment for more information).

How can I look after myself?

Supporting someone else can be challenging. Making sure that you look after your own wellbeing can mean that you have the energy, time and distance to help someone else. For example:

- Take a break when you need it. If you're feeling overwhelmed by supporting someone or it's taking up a lot of time or energy, taking some time for yourself can help you feel refreshed.
- Talk to someone you trust about how you're feeling. You may want to be careful about how much information you share about the person you're supporting, but talking about your own feelings to a friend can help you feel supported too.
- Set boundaries and be realistic about what you can do. Your support is really valuable, but it's up to your friend or family member to seek support for themselves. Remember that small, simple things can help, and that just being there for them is probably helping a lot.
- Share your caring role with others, if you can. It's often easier to support someone if you're not doing it alone.

For more ideas about how to keep yourself well, see our pages on coping when supporting someone else, improving and maintaining your wellbeing, and managing stress.

< Private sector careUseful contacts >

It was a hot afternoon in June 2019, when I got a call from my best friend. I was working in Chad at the time, and it was 8 a.m. in the Americas, where she was calling from.

A few minutes before that call, she texted me, “Can I call you?” To this today, five years later, I still thank God I wasn’t in the middle of a meeting and could answer yes.

I picked up the phone and immediately heard her shaky, tear-filled voice. “I’m thinking about ending my life,” she said on the other end of the line. In that instant, it felt like my blood pressure dropped and my heart started beating harder and louder in my chest.

As a clinical psychologist, I had worked with suicidal patients in the mental health unit of one of the largest hospitals in my hometown. But this was different. I had never been in a position where one of my loved ones was in such a situation. I couldn’t even imagine that someone so close to me might be facing the same challenges as my patients. Clinical psychologists don’t provide professional support to friends or family.

Luckily, at that moment on the phone, I wasn’t the psychologist someone calls for an appointment; I was simply a young woman trying to support her best friend across the world, just like anyone might have to do.

I’m so relieved that wasn’t the last time I spoke to her. It very well could have been if I hadn’t used the right words at the time she needed them most. Fortunately, I had a set of skills that I had learned and practiced over the years—skills that can save lives and can be used by anyone who is willing to support their loved ones, no matter their profession or expertise in mental health.

Here they are: five steps you can take to support someone in emotional distress.

1. Listen.

Listen closely and actively, not just with your ears but with your whole body. Pay attention to what the person is saying, but also to their gestures, eyes, and body language.

Be fully present, listening without interruptions or judgments. Let their words flow into your ears and process everything, paying attention to words they repeat.

Listening might seem easy, but truly listening is a skill. Often, when we talk to people, they are just waiting for the slightest breath to jump in with their own story. They were thinking about what they wanted to say rather than focusing on what you wanted to communicate. Don't be that person when a friend comes to you for support.

Listen fully and do your best to stay silent. It's difficult, I know. Instead, use interjections or brief words of affirmation to show you're engaged. Give the person the space to vent and release the emotions they've been bottling up.

2. Validate their emotions.

Now is the time to speak. When you feel your friend has said everything they need to, go back to the words and emotions you noted in your memory while listening. Acknowledge their feelings and emotions, using their own words if possible, to show you have really heard and understood how they are feeling by saying something like: "I hear that you're feeling desperate and hopeless, that sounds really hard" or "I can see you're feeling deeply sad and alone; I'm here for you." Validate your friend's emotions, without any negative judgment.

Ask follow-up questions if you need. This shows you are genuinely trying to understand the situation. Avoid cliché phrases and invalidating comments like: "You are too sensitive," "You shouldn't be feeling that way; you are lucky," or "Don't worry, you will feel better."

If your friend is struggling like mine was, don't hesitate to ask if they have a plan or the means to end their life. It's a difficult question, but it's crucial to understand the urgency of the situation and get additional help immediately.

Photo by Marie Arago for Project HOPE, 2022

3. Offer your support.

Let your friend know you are there for them in any way they need. Ask how they think you could help. If they are too overwhelmed to answer and have no idea, then is time to roll out a list of possibilities for how you think you could support them. Sometimes, just being there and listening is all the support they need. Sometimes people just need to be heard and understood without expecting any advice in exchange.

Your list of supportive options could also look like this: “I can listen to you, I can hug you, I can give you advice, or all three. You let me know what you need.” Offering concrete options, like spending time together or helping with a task, can also help them feel better.

4. Invite them to action.

Encourage them to engage in something that might help relieve their emotional distress. If possible, do it together. Another action could be to practice an emotional regulation technique that you could find in our Mental Health Resource Center. It could be a culturally appropriate practice like prayer, singing, or dancing. Support them through that difficult moment by helping them find positive coping mechanisms and avoiding harmful ones like

drinking alcohol, which may offer temporary relief but can be harmful for the physical and psychological well-being in the long-term.

5. Seek professional support.

While you can offer valuable support to your friends and relatives, it is important to remember that it doesn't replace professional mental health care. Emotional distress and mental health conditions can be overwhelming and require professional follow up, especially if this is impairing the normal functioning or causing important emotional suffering. Sharing resources and contacts of mental health professionals could be a valuable to help others. If someone's life is at risk, get professional support right away, and first and foremost, never leave them alone.

I hope these five steps offer you some strategies to better support others in need. We can all contribute to each other's well-being. Using the right words and skills can be a game-changer and a life-saver.

Pamela Londoño Salazar is a mental health advisor at Project HOPE.

Supporting someone who may be struggling with mental health is one of the most meaningful things you can do. Whether it's a friend, family member or colleague, your care and understanding can make a significant difference. With nearly 1 in 5 people in the U.S. living with a mental illness, there's a good chance someone in your circle of close friends and family is affected. Here are 10 ways to offer support effectively with Mental Health First Aid (MHFA).

1. Approach and assess for risk of suicide or harm.

Try to find a suitable time or place to start a conversation with the person, keeping their privacy and confidentiality in mind. The right setting can encourage openness and allow them to share their feelings. Look for a quiet, private setting where the person feels safe and comfortable. Avoid public places where they may feel exposed or rushed.

If you sense that the person may be in crisis, it's essential to ask direct questions about their feelings. You might ask, "Are you thinking of hurting yourself or ending your life?" While it can be uncomfortable, asking these questions shows the person you care and can actually provide them relief. If the person does not want to confide in you, encourage them to talk to someone they trust. You can get the conversation started by saying something

like, “I noticed that …” Try to be accepting, even if you don’t agree with what they are saying. It may be a relief to them just to have someone to share their feelings with.

2. Listen without judgment.

Being a good nonjudgmental listener is one of the most valuable gifts you can offer. Create a safe space for your friend to express their feelings. Many people experiencing a challenge or distress want to be heard, so let the person share without interruption. Try to have empathy for their situation

3. Give reassurance and information.

After someone has shared their experiences and emotions with you, be ready to provide hope, useful facts and information. Start by acknowledging their feelings. Let them know that it’s OK to feel what they’re feeling — and that they are not alone. Use empathetic statements like, “I’m really sorry you’re going through this” or “It’s understandable to feel overwhelmed.” Validating a person’s emotions can help them feel heard and respected, and your reassurance can be powerful.

You may want to share stories of recovery and resilience, either from your own experiences or from others (with their permission, of course). Let your friend know that many people who face similar challenges go on to lead fulfilling lives. This can encourage hope and remind them that improvement is possible.

4. Encourage appropriate professional help.

The earlier someone gets help, the more it can support their journey to recovery. So, it’s important to offer to help your friend learn more about the options available to them. If you sense that they’re struggling, gently suggest that they consider speaking with a mental health professional. Offer to help them find a resource. You can even accompany them to their first appointment if they feel anxious about it.

5. Encourage self-help and other support strategies.

Supporting someone with their mental health involves encouraging them to take an active role in their own wellbeing. This can be empowering and can help them build resilience. You might help them identify their support network or programs within the community, and create an emotional and physical self-care plan.

The MHFA Action Plan (ALGEE) has five steps, which can be used in any order.

6. Check in regularly and offer practical help.

A simple message or phone call to ask how they're doing can show that you care. Regular check-ins can help your friend feel connected and supported, reminding them they are not alone . Sometimes, the stress of daily responsibilities can feel overwhelming, so offer to help with tasks like grocery shopping, running errands or cooking meals. Practical support can alleviate some of their burdens while demonstrating that you care.

7. Educate yourself about mental health challenges.

Understanding mental health issues will better equip you to give support. Consider getting trained in MHFA. You'll learn about common mental health challenges, ways to help and what to look for with topics such as:

- Common signs and symptoms of mental health challenges
- Common signs and symptoms of substance use challenges
- How to interact with a person in crisis
- How to connect a person with help
- Trauma, substance use and self-care

8. Be patient.

Recovery from mental health challenges takes time and is often not linear. Be patient and avoid pushing them to "get better" quickly. Offer support without pressure and let them know you're there along the way.

9. Be mindful of your language.

The way you communicate can have a significant impact. Avoid using phrases that might dismiss their feelings or experiences. Instead, validate their emotions and let them know it's OK to feel what they're feeling.

10. Consider Becoming a MHFA Instructor.

Learning MHFA skills and sharing them regularly with others will help you be prepared to assist your circle when they need it most. This training equips you to recognize signs of mental health challenges and guide others toward the support they need. As an **Instructor**, you'll not only improve your ability to respond more compassionately and help those around you effectively, but also build a network of support that encourages open conversations about mental health.

Supporting someone with their mental health can be challenging, but it is also incredibly rewarding. By being present, understanding, and compassionate, you can play an

important and even life-changing role in their journey toward healing. Your support can be a powerful reminder that they are not alone.

Together, we can make a difference by training every 1 in 15 people to address mental health and substance use challenges within their circles. Learn more about **MHFA** by finding a course near you.

Understanding how you might help someone

Many of us experience mental health problems at some time, so it's likely we will know someone who will struggle with their mental health.

We can all feel anxious, stressed or low at times, but it can be a problem if these feelings get worse, go on for a long time or affect our daily lives.

It might take time for someone's mental health to improve, and some of us may need professional help, but there are ways to help and support someone to get back to positive mental health. We also have advice if you're looking after a child or a young person's mental health.

If you're worried about a work colleague or employee, or want to learn more about mental health support in the workplace, Mental Health at Work has relevant information and resources.

Ways you can help others

Tell them you're worried

This might be a good way to open up a conversation. It also shows you care about that person and have time for them – and that they do not have to avoid you.

Carry on as usual

Do what you usually do – behaving differently can make someone feel more isolated. Do not be afraid to offer kind words and a space to talk, whether by phone, messaging or in person.

Reassure them

The first time someone mentions their worries is a big step. It's good to recognise this and reassure them. Let them know you're there to listen when they need to talk.

Offer your time to listen

Listening is an important skill. Ask open questions that start with "how", "what", "where" or "when". This can help people open up. Get Listening tips from the Samaritans

Do not force it

Do not force someone to talk to you or get help, or go to a GP on their behalf, as it might make them feel uncomfortable. Gently explore their reasons and listen without judgement, as this might help them to work out what to do.

Look after yourself

It can be upsetting to hear someone you care about in distress. Be kind to yourself and take some time to relax or do something you enjoy. Check out our mental wellbeing tips.

Offer practical help

Little acts of kindness – like offering to do the shopping or to go to professional appointments with them – can help. Find out what works for them.

Why your support matters

You might worry that you do not know how to help, you'll say something wrong or make things worse, but the small things we say or do can make a big difference to someone.

Just telling them you see their struggle can be important help.

Someone might be afraid to let others know they are not coping, so being able to connect with others can be a relief.

Starting the conversation may be difficult, and it's normal to feel upset if someone you care about is struggling. But it can help to stay calm and assure them they do not have to deal with things alone.

You can also be there for them in other ways, like cooking for them, going for a walk or watching a film together. A chat may come more naturally if you are doing something together first.

Fear often stops us from talking about our mental health problems. We can break down these barriers and talk more openly when we know more about mental health problems and how common they are.

What to do if someone needs more help

If someone you know has mental health issues that are affecting their daily life, they may benefit from further support.

Tell them they have taken a vital first step by talking to you, and that it's now important they speak to someone.

Suggest they could:

- contact a GP
- get help from NHS 111
- refer themselves for free, non-urgent NHS talking therapy (covers most of England)

Charities, helplines and communities

The organisations listed here offer advice on how you can help others:

- Find support on the Hub of Hope
- Samaritans: If you're worried about someone else
- Mind: Helping someone else
- Rethink Mental Illness: Carers hub
- Movember has guidance on how to start conversations with men who are struggling
- Time to Change: Tips for talking about mental health

How to Be Emotionally Supportive

Offering emotional support typically involves asking questions, listening, and then providing validation and the type of support a person needs, whether physical closeness or something else.

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Support comes in many forms.

You might offer physical support to someone having trouble standing or walking, or financial support to a loved one in a tight spot.

Other kinds of support are important, too. People in your life like family members, friends, and even close co-workers, can help lift you up emotionally by offering social and emotional support.

What it is

People show emotional support for others by offering genuine encouragement, reassurance, and compassion. This might include things like verbal expressions of sympathy or physical gestures of affection.

Emotional support can come from other sources, too — religious or spiritual sources, community activities, or even your pets. Whatever form it takes, this support can improve anyone's outlook and general wellness.

Some people have a knack for being emotionally supportive, but this skill doesn't come naturally to everyone.

You can develop these skills, though, with a little practice. Keep reading for 13 tips on providing quality emotional support to anyone in your life.

Ask…

When you want to provide emotional support to someone you care about, asking a few questions is a great place to start.

“How can I support you?” can sometimes work, but it’s not always the best approach.

While good intentions lie behind questions like these, they sometimes fail to have the impact you desire.

People don’t always know what they want or need, especially in the middle of a difficult situation. So, this question can be so broad it leaves someone unsure how to reply.

Instead, try asking questions tailored to a situation or the person’s state of mind, such as:

- “You seem a little upset today. Would you like to talk about it?”
- “I know your boss was giving you a tough time. How have you been holding up?”

If you know someone has faced some challenges and aren’t sure how to open a conversation, try starting with some general questions, such as, “What’s been happening in your life lately?”

Try to keep your questions open-ended instead of asking questions that can be answered with a “yes” or a “no.” This invites an explanation and helps keep the discussion going.

… and listen

It’s not enough to simply ask questions. Listening actively, or empathically, is another important part of providing emotional support.

When you *really* listen to someone, you give them your full attention. Show interest in their words by:

- displaying open body language, like turning your body toward them, relaxing your face, or keeping your arms and legs uncrossed
- avoiding distractions, like playing with your phone or thinking about other things you need to do
- nodding along with their words or making noises of agreement instead of interrupting
- asking for clarification when you don’t understand something
- summarizing what they’ve said to show you have a good grasp of the situation

Using good listening skills shows others you care about what they're going through. For someone who's struggling, knowing that someone else has heard their pain can make a big difference.

Validate

Think about the last time you went through something difficult. You probably wanted to talk to someone about the problem, but you may not have necessarily wanted them to fix it for you or make it go away.

Maybe you just wanted to vent your frustration or disappointment and get some soothing acknowledgment in return.

Support doesn't require you to fully understand a problem or provide a solution. Often, it involves nothing more than validation.

When you validate someone, you're letting them know you see and understand their perspective.

The support people often want most is recognition of their distress. So, when a loved one tells you about the challenges they're going through, they may not need you to jump in and help. You might offer the best support simply by showing concern and offering a caring presence.

Some validating phrases you can use are:

- "I'm sorry you're dealing with that situation. It sounds so painful."
- "That sounds so upsetting. I understand why you're feeling so stressed right now."

Avoid judgment

Nobody likes feeling judged. Someone facing a difficult situation as a result of their actions may have done some self-judgment already.

Regardless, when seeking support, people generally don't want to hear a critique — even if you offer constructive criticism with the best of intentions.

When offering support, try to keep your opinions on what they should have done or where they went wrong to yourself.

Avoid asking questions they might interpret as blaming or judgmental, such as, "So what made them so mad at you?"

Even if you don't offer any direct judgment or criticism, tone can convey a lot of emotion, so your voice might share emotions you didn't intend to say outright.

Take care to keep notes of disapproval out of your voice by focusing on feelings like sympathy and compassion when you speak.

Skip the advice

You might think you're helping someone by telling them how to fix a problem. But, generally speaking, people don't want advice unless they request it.

Even when you *know* you have the right solution, don't offer it unless they specifically ask something like, "What do you think I should do?" or "Do you know of anything that might help?"

If they've moved from "venting" to "talking through the problem," a better approach often involves using reflective questions to help them find solutions on their own.

You might, for example, say something like:

- "Have you been in a situation like this before? What helped then?"
- "Can you think of any specific changes that might help you feel better?"

Authenticity over perfection

When you want to support someone, don't worry too much about whether you're providing the "right" kind of support.

Two different people typically won't offer support in exactly the same way. That's OK, though, since there are plenty of ways to support someone.

Your approach might also vary depending on the person you want to support.

Instead of searching for the perfect thing to say, go for what feels natural and genuine. An authentic expression of concern will likely mean far more to your loved one than a canned response or one devoid of true feeling.

Build them up

Times of personal difficulty, especially ones involving rejection, can bring people down and make them doubt themselves and their abilities.

If you notice someone you care for seems to be a little low, harder on themselves than usual, or going through some self-doubt, a sincere compliment or two can go a long way toward improving their outlook.

When offering compliments, you'll want to keep a few things in mind:

- **Keep them relevant to the current situation.** For example, you might remind a friend who's upset about a mistake at work about their usual pattern of success.
- **Choose compliments that highlight specific strengths over empty compliments that might apply to anyone.** Instead of simply saying "You're so thoughtful," pinpoint what makes them thoughtful and share your appreciation for that skill.
- **Don't gush.** A well-placed compliment can make someone feel great. Overdoing it can make people skeptical of the compliments, or even a little uncomfortable (even when you do really mean them).

Support their solutions

When a close friend or romantic partner believes they've found an answer to their problem, you might have some doubts about the effectiveness of that solution.

Unless their approach involves some risk or danger, it's generally best to offer support instead of pointing out the flaws in their plan.

They may not have chosen the approach you would, but that doesn't mean they're wrong. Even if you can't see their solution working out, you can't know how things will turn out with certainty.

Avoid telling them what you think they should do, since this can sometimes undo any positive feelings from support you've already offered.

If they ask what you think, you could offer some gentle guidance that might help their plan succeed. Even if they ask for your honest opinion, avoid responding with harsh or negative criticism or tearing their plan apart.

Offer physical affection

Physical affection isn't appropriate in all situations, of course.

Depending on your relationship with the person you want to support, hugs, kisses, and other intimate touches and caresses can often have a powerful impact.

- After a difficult conversation, giving someone a hug can provide physical support that reinforces the emotional support you just offered.
- Holding a loved one's hand while they go through a painful procedure, receive unpleasant news, or deal with a distressing phone call can help them feel stronger.
- Cuddling with your partner after they've had a bad day can wordlessly emphasize your feelings for them and offer healing comfort.

Avoid minimizing

People face all kinds of unpleasant situations in life. Some of these challenges have a much broader or far-reaching impact than others.

It's not for anyone else to say how upset someone should (or shouldn't) feel about any given type of distress.

Comparing a loved one's difficulties with problems faced by other people often happens inadvertently, as an attempt at consolation.

You might intend to cheer them up by saying things like, "It could be a lot worse," or "At least you still have a job." This denies their experience and often implies they shouldn't feel bad in the first place.

No matter how trivial you think someone's concern is, avoid brushing it off.

Sure, maybe the lecture your best friend received from her boss wouldn't have bothered *you*. But you can't fully understand her experience or emotional response, so it's not fair to minimize her feelings.

Make a nice gesture

A loved one trying to manage emotional turmoil may have less mental capacity for dealing with their usual responsibilities.

After you've listened and validated their feelings, you can also show compassion by helping lighten their burden, if at all possible.

You don't have to do anything grand or sweeping. In fact, little things can often have more impact, especially when your actions show you truly heard and understood their words.

Try one of these small kindnesses:

- Do one of your partner's household chores, like dishes or vacuuming.
- Pick up lunch or dinner for a friend having a rough day.
- Bring flowers or a favorite beverage or snack to a sibling going through a nasty breakup.
- Offer to run an errand for a stressed friend or parent.

Plan a distracting activity

Some difficult situations have no solution. You can listen to your loved one's pain and offer your shoulder (physically and emotionally) for support.

But when time is the only means of fixing their problem, you might both feel a little helpless.

You can still offer support, though. Someone facing a tough situation might struggle to focus on other things.

They might want to distract themselves from stress and worry but not know where to begin.

You, on the other hand, probably have enough distance from the problem that you can come up with a few ideas to take their mind off their troubles.

Aim for a fun, low-key activity you can reschedule if they don't feel up to it. You usually can't go wrong with something you know they enjoy, like a walk along a favorite nature trail or trip to the dog park.

If you can't get out, try a craft, household project, or game instead.

Check back in

Once you've helped a loved one explore a difficult situation, don't just drop the matter completely.

Revisiting the topic in a few days lets them know their troubles matter to you even though you don't have any active involvement.

A simple, "Hey, I just wanted to see how you were coping after the other day. I know it can take some time to heal from a breakup, so I want you to know I'm here if you feel like talking again."

They may not want to talk about their distress all the time — that's totally normal. You don't need to bring it up every day, but it's perfectly all right to ask how things are going and let them know you care.

If they've asked for advice and you have a potential solution, you can introduce it by saying, "You know, I was thinking about your situation, and I came up with something that might help. Would you be interested in hearing about it?"

The bottom line

Emotional support isn't tangible. You can't see it or hold it in your hands and you may not notice its impact right away, especially if you're struggling.

But it can remind you that others love you, value you, and have your back.

When you offer emotional support to others, you're telling them they aren't alone. Over time, this message may have even more of a positive impact on mental health than temporary mood boosters or forms of support.

When a friend is going through a tough time, it can be hard to know what to do or say. the facts: getting help helping a friend going through a tough time You might have noticed they: don't seem like themselves, or they're acting differently. You might: let them know that you care ask them what you can do to support them let them know that you're there to help them. They might not open up at first, but showing them you have their back can give your friend strength and hope. This also lets them know you're someone they can talk to if they do decide to open up later on. What if my friend doesn't want any help? For many people, reaching out for support can be really difficult. Some of your friends might need time and space. Be patient with your friend. Don't judge them or get frustrated if they don't take you up on your offer of support. Remind them that you're there if they need you and give them time. Sometimes you might need to involve someone else – like a trusted adult. If you do decide to tell someone, try to let your friend know that you're planning on doing this first and encourage them to get involved in the conversation. Asking your friend if they need help can be hard, especially when you don't know what kind of help you can offer. Checking in can make a big difference to the person having a tough time. The headspace Clinical Reference Group have approved this clinical resource. Fact sheets are for general information only. They are not intended to be and should not be relied on as a substitute for

specific medical or health advice. While every effort is taken to ensure the information is accurate, headspace makes no representations and gives no warranties that this information is correct, current, complete, reliable or suitable for any purpose. We disclaim all responsibility and liability for any direct or indirect loss, damage, cost or expense whatsoever in the use of or reliance upon this information. 03 November 2022 If you need support, it's a good idea to reach out for extra help. A good place to start is a trusted friend, family member, Elder, teacher, counsellor, or a health service. You can also contact a headspace centre or eheadspace if you would prefer to chat to someone online or over the phone. If you or your friend need medical help right now contact 000. Getting support headspace National Youth Mental Health Foundation is funded by the Australian Government. What can I say to help my friend? It can be hard to know how to start the conversation. Sometimes it can be as simple as, 'are you doing OK? I've noticed we haven't been in contact as much recently' – or mention what you've noticed that's different. Some things to help you plan: Are you in a good headspace and ready to have the chat? Have you had a look at the headspace website to get a better understanding of what might be going on for them? Have you got enough time, and are you free from distractions? Have you chosen somewhere private? Have you found a time that's good for them to chat? If it looks like your friend would benefit from additional support, you can say things like: 'Have you talked to anyone else about this? It's great you've talked to me, but it might be good to get advice and support from a health worker.' 'It doesn't have to be super intense and you can make choices about what you want to talk about.' 'A GP can help you with this stuff. You can find one that bulk-bills, so you don't have to pay. I can go along with you, if you want.' 'There are some great websites you can check out to get more information. Have you heard of headspace or ReachOut?' 'Did you know that you can get free and confidential support online or over the phone from places like eheadspace, Kids Helpline and Lifeline. All of these services are anonymous and can help you figure out what's going on for you and where to go for the right support.' 'I know you're not feeling great now, but with the right support, you can get through this. Lots of people do.' 'It's OK to feel this way and I'm here and have your back.' Let your friend know you believe their concern and let them know they're not alone. Look after yourself Supporting a friend through a tough time can be difficult, so it's important that you take care of yourself, too. You can check out our tips for a healthy headspace to look after yourself. These include: get into life create connections learn skills for tough times eat well stay active get enough sleep cut back on alcohol and other drugs. Try to remember that you're their friend and not their counsellor. Be realistic about what you can and can't do. Set boundaries for yourself to make sure that you're doing the best thing for you, your friend and the friendship. If you or someone you know is going through a tough time you can get help and support from headspace, your school, TAFE or university wellbeing service or your local health provider.

For more information, to find your nearest headspace centre, or for online and telephone support, visit headspace.org.au If you need immediate assistance call 000 or to speak to someone urgently, please call Lifeline on 13 11 14 or Suicide Call Back Service on 1300 659 467.

When someone puts their suicidal thoughts into action, they are engaging in suicidal behavior, which can lead to an attempted or completed suicide. Changes in eating or sleeping habits, withdrawing from friends and family, and changes in mood are all signs of potential suicidal behavior. If you notice these behaviors in a friend or someone you love, even if you're not sure whether they are having suicidal thoughts, it's important to express your concern.

Learn more warning signs of suicide.

Risk Factors for Moving From Suicidal Thoughts to Suicidal Behaviors

Research shows that certain causes of suicidal thoughts can increase the risk of those thoughts turning into suicidal behavior.

- **Social isolation:** When someone feels they do not belong to any group or feels disconnected from meaningful relationships, they may feel like no one will miss them.
- **Feeling like a burden:** When someone feels that their life is more of a burden than a benefit to their friends and family, they can start to believe that people would be better off if they were gone.
- **High tolerance for pain or lethal situations:** When someone has been exposed to painful experiences such as abuse, self-injury, substance misuse, or other destructive behaviors, they are more likely to be able to overcome their self-preservation instinct. If someone is engaging in painful suicidal behaviors, they may be training themselves to continue the behavior through the pain.

Certain situations can contribute to these feelings. Some are long-term situations, such as a history of abuse or living with a chronic mental or physical illness. Other times, these feelings can be made worse by a sudden tragic event, such as losing a loved one unexpectedly, receiving a serious medical diagnosis, getting fired, or failing out of school.

How to Tell If Suicidal Behavior Is Leading to a Planned Suicide Attempt

With suicide, there aren't always clear-cut stages of behavior. Moving from suicidal thoughts to behaviors to a planned attempt does not always happen in a linear way. Someone can think passive suicidal thoughts like, "Life is pointless," while driving recklessly, for example, while someone else could think of what they would write in a suicide note without planning the means to attempt suicide.

Because suicidal thoughts and behaviors don't always escalate in a clear way, it can sometimes be hard to tell when someone is feeling suicidal and planning a suicide attempt.

Some suicidal behaviors, however, are more reliable indicators that someone is planning to attempt suicide. If you are concerned about a loved one, watch for the following signs:

- Gathering the means to attempt suicide, such as buying a gun or stockpiling pills.
- Writing a suicide note.
- Increasing self-destructive or harmful behavior, such as reckless driving or increased drug or alcohol use.
- Giving away their belongings or writing a list of instructions for giving away belongings after they die.
- Saying goodbye to their loved ones, believing they won't see them again.
- Using hopeless or despondent language, such as, "I want to die," "What's the point of being alive?" or, "No one would miss me if I died."
- A sudden shift in behavior from agitated and angry to calm. It may seem like their mood has improved, but it can mean they are "at peace" because they have a plan to end their life.

How to Help Someone You Know Who is Suicidal

Most people can be helped in getting through their moment of crisis if they have someone who will spend time with them, listen, take them seriously and help them talk about their thoughts and feelings. Almost every suicidal crisis has at its center a strong ambivalence: "I can't handle the pain anymore," but not necessarily, "I want to be dead forever!" What most suicidal people want is not to be dead but some way to get through the terrible pain they are experiencing and someone they can turn to during those terrible moments of fear and desperation.

Having someone to talk to can make a big difference. However, you may need to be persistent before they are willing to talk. Talking about suicide or suicidal thoughts will not push someone to kill themselves. It is also not true that people who talk about killing themselves will not actually try it. Take any expressed intention of suicide very seriously. While you may not be able to solve these problems for a friend or classmate, you may be able to help the person find someone who can help.

How to respond to a person who is potentially suicidal

1. Recognize the warning signs of depression and suicide risk.

Research suggests that the majority of people who attempt suicide literally do something to let others know their intentions before they act. These "warning signs" consist of personal behaviors, verbal and non-verbal communications. Mental and emotional illnesses such as depression and bi-polar disorders are often tied to suicidal feelings. The risk of suicide may be greatest as the person's depression begins to lift.

2. Take suicidal statements seriously and trust your instincts.

Fifty to 75 percent of all suicides give some warning of their intentions to a friend or family member. Imminent signs must be taken seriously.

3. Get involved and use "active listening."

By listening to what the person in crisis has to say and by asking direct and open questions, we show our willingness to talk about anything with that person, including his/her feelings about suicide.

- Start by telling the person you are concerned and give him or her examples.
- Do not attempt to argue someone out of suicide. Rather, let the person know you care, that he or she is not alone, that suicidal feelings are temporary and that

depression can be treated. Avoid the temptation to say, "You have so much to live for," or "Your suicide will hurt your family."

4. Encourage the person to seek professional help.

- Be actively involved in encouraging the person to see a physician or mental health professional immediately.
- Individuals contemplating suicide often don't believe they can be helped, so you may have to do more.
- Help the person find a knowledgeable mental health professional or a reputable treatment facility, and take them to the treatment.

5. While directly asking about suicide can be scary, the person you're concerned about needs you to ask, "Do you feel so badly you are thinking about suicide?"

Almost everyone thinks about suicide at some point in their life. By listening and observing the "warning signs" of suicide and asking direct questions, we demonstrate our willingness to talk about anything with the person in crisis, including his/her feelings about suicide. He or she is likely to feel understood and that you understand the pain they are in. It can be a great relief to the person if his or her suicidal feelings can be brought out into the open and discussed freely without shock or disapproval; it shows that you are taking the person seriously.

6. If the answer is "Yes," take the person's response seriously and continue the "Suicide Risk" assessment questions.

- "Do you have a plan to take your own life?" or "Have you thought of how you would do it?"
- "Do you have the means or materials available to act out your plan?" If so, "What and where are they?"
- "Have you set a time?" or "Have you decided when you would do it?"

If the answer is still "Yes," ask:

- "Have you ever attempted suicide before?"
- "What happened then?"

If the person has a definite plan, the means are available and the time is set and immediate, you should consider the person to be high risk for suicide.

7. Do not leave a person whom you feel is "high risk" for suicide alone, even for a moment.

If a person has expressed suicidal feelings, has a plan, the means available and has a time set, you should always take him or her seriously. If there is any doubt, take him or her seriously. A person who is "high risk" for suicide **should not be left alone.** Keep talking to that person, stay with him or her or arrange for another party (someone who that person trusts and feels comfortable with) to stay with them. Remove from the vicinity any firearms, drugs or sharp objects that could be used for suicide.

8. If the person in crisis has taken some form of life-threatening action, get help immediately.

If a person has taken any action that you believe could be considered life-threatening, don't hesitate to get that person to a hospital yourself (if practical) or call an ambulance or emergency services.

Additional suggestions

- Be direct. Talk openly and matter-of-factly about suicide.
- Be non-judgmental. Don't debate whether suicide is right or wrong, or whether feelings are good or bad. Don't lecture on the value of life.
- Get involved. Become available. Show interest and support.
- Don't dare him or her to do it.
- Don’t ask "why." This encourages defensiveness.
- Offer empathy, not sympathy.
- Never promise to keep suicide a secret. Seek support.
- Offer hope that alternatives are available but do not offer glib reassurance.
- Do not counsel the person yourself, seek professional help.
- Don't pretend you have all the answers. The most important thing you can do may be to help them find help.
- Don't be afraid of being wrong. It is difficult for even experts to understand who is at serious risk of suicide and who is not. Many of the warning signs for suicide could also indicate problems with drug or alcohol abuse, domestic violence, depression, or another mental illness, which still need professional intervention.

5 Action Steps to Help Someone Having Thoughts of Suicide

- Download PDF
- En español

We can all take steps to help prevent suicide. **Knowing the warning signs for suicide and how to get help can save lives.**

5 Action Steps

Here are 5 steps you can take to #BeThe1To help someone who is having thoughts of suicide:

1. **ASK:** “Are you thinking about suicide?” It’s not an easy question to ask, but it can help start a conversation. Studies show that asking people if they are suicidal does not increase suicidal behavior or thoughts.
2. **BE THERE:** Listening without judgment is key to learning what the person is thinking and feeling. Research suggests acknowledging and talking about suicide may reduce suicidal thoughts.
3. **HELP KEEP THEM SAFE:** Reducing access to highly lethal items or places can help prevent suicide. Asking the person if they have a plan and making lethal means less available or less deadly can help the person stay safe when suicidal thoughts arise.
4. **HELP THEM CONNECT:** Connecting the person with the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline **(call or text 988)** and other community resources can give them a safety net when they need it. You can also help them reach out to a trusted family member, friend, spiritual advisor, or mental health professional.
5. **FOLLOW UP:** Staying in touch with the person after they have experienced a crisis or been discharged from care can make a difference. Studies show that supportive, ongoing contact can play an important role in suicide prevention.

Learn more about suicide prevention and the #BeThe1To campaign.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES
National Institutes of Health
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Share the Infographic on Social Media

5 Action Steps to Help Someone Having Thoughts of Suicide

Disponible en español

If you think someone might be considering suicide, be the one to help them by taking these 5 steps: Ask. Be There. Help Keep Them Safe. Help Them Connect. Follow Up. Learn more at: https://go.nih.gov/zC9dLJf #shareNIMH

Copy post to clipboard

Find more resources to share on social media.

Reprints

It can feel difficult if someone you're close to is feeling stressed. You might find it hard if you can't help them change the situation that is causing them stress. But there are still lots of practical things you can do to help.

Help them notice signs and symptoms of stress

Often, someone might not notice that how they feel or behave is a sign of stress. For example, this may include having problems sleeping, or drinking more alcohol than usual.

You may be able to see these signs in someone else. This could even be before they recognise it themselves.

If you've noticed this, you could let them know and ask how you can help. Try to be gentle when starting this conversation, in case it is something they are not aware of or feel sensitive about.

Listen to how they feel

Having a chance to talk could help them feel calmer and more able to deal with their stress. Being there for them and listening without judging them can help.

[My friends can help by] making me a cup of tea, holding me while I cry, making me laugh…

Reassure them

When someone is in the middle of a stressful time, it can be hard to see when it might end. Let them know that situations change and can get better.

Help them relax

You could help them research relaxation techniques and find ways to practise them. For example, this could be a weekly yoga class, or setting aside time for breathing exercises at home. This might become something that you could do together.

[When I'm stressed I need friends to] hug me. It's amazing how good a single hug can feel.

Help identify their triggers

It may help to talk about things you've noticed that might trigger their stress. But remember that they might also find this conversation stressful. Try to stay open-minded and avoid judging them. Being patient can also help.

Not putting extra pressure on me... letting me know they're there but that I don't have to do anything.

Help with causes of stress

There are many situations or experiences that can cause stress. You might be able to help them look for support for some of these issues. For example, this could be help with debt, housing problems or difficulties at work.

Support them to seek help

You could help them contact their GP, go with them to an appointment or do some research on mental health and wellbeing. See our pages on helping someone else seek help for more ideas.

Look after yourself

If someone around you is very stressed, you might feel stressed too. If this happens, try to take a step back and look after your own wellbeing. Having good wellbeing can make you feel more able to help someone else.

See our pages on wellbeing to find tips for supporting yourself.

[I want them to] understand that I may be irritable but I don't mean to hurt them in any way.

How to Support Someone Who Is Stressed

Medically Reviewed by Melinda Ratini, MS, DO on August 17, 2021

Written by Victoria Hamilton

- Signs of Stress
- Help Them Recognize The Problem
- Listen to Them
- Identify the Problem
-

3 min read

|

Listen

It's hard enough to be stressed yourself, but when someone you know is stressed, it can be difficult to know how to help. Learning to help others deal with mental pressure is a useful skill that could serve you well in many situations. There are many ways to support someone who is stressed.

Signs of Stress

Stress can happen when you go through life changes or face challenges that you're not prepared for. Your body creates physical and mental responses to help your body adjust to new situations. Although stress isn't always a bad thing, if you don't try to relieve it or relax, it can take a toll on you.

Common physical signs of stress include:

- Difficulty sleeping and exhaustion
- Headaches
- Shaking
- Dizziness
- Tense muscles

- Stomach pains
- Digestive issues

Common emotional and mental signs of stress include:

- Anxiety
- Exasperation
- Depressed feelings
- Sadness
- Panic attacks

AD

Help Them Recognize The Problem

Whether you want to help a friend, coworker, family member, or other acquaintance, a great first step is to help them understand that they are stressed. They might find it tough to come to terms with what they are going through. They may be ignoring their feelings.

You can be kind but direct when reaching out to them. You can let them know you've noticed changes in their behavior or other signs of stress. If you talk to them with a caring attitude, they may be more open to letting you help them manage stress.

Listen to Them

It could be tempting to give advice right after offering your support. But how will you know what to say if you don't first listen to how they're feeling? You might end up just being a listening ear for your stressed-out friend, and that's OK. Knowing that someone they trust cares and is offering their undivided attention could do wonders.

Another reason that listening is more important than talking is that it takes the pressure off of your friend. As they're confiding in you, they should know that you're there to support them, not push them to do something. If they aren't ready to take action, that's OK.

Identify the Problem

Talk about what might have caused the stress. Depending on how well you know them, you can give examples of behavior changes or new habits you've seen. Avoid accusing them of anything. You can have an open conversation where you each have the chance to express your perspectives.

Get Active

A great way to help your friend get rid of stress is to exercise. Physical activity helps manage stress for many reasons. Exercise:

- Increases endorphins. During exercise, the brain releases endorphins. Endorphins are neurotransmitters that help you feel good. Any activity that gets your heart pumping will release endorphins. You can suggest going on a hike, playing a sport, or taking a bike ride together.
- Battles negative side effects of stress. Physical activity creates similar symptoms in the body that stress does, for example, the fight or flight response. Exercising teaches your body how to positively handle these symptoms. As your body learns that these signs of stress aren't always negative, it will learn how to protect itself.
- Offers time for meditation. Exercise allows you to let go of what might be bothering you. Your focus is on your body instead of your stressors. This is the body's natural response when it gets moving. This can allow your friend to shed tension and calm down.

Fill Their Free Time

You can encourage your friend to do one of two things: spend time alone or spend time with others. This depends on their personality and interests, but it's worth suggesting both as good options to manage stress.

Taking some "me time" can be relaxing. This can allow your friend to do some calm thinking about their situation and how they can make it better. If there's a hobby they enjoy, they can take a break from the stress and throw themselves into it.

Suggest a fun activity that will engage their mind and distract them from the stress. Connecting with others could give them laughter, distractions, and a new perspective.

Remain positive as you try to support someone who is stressed. The best thing you can do is be present and supportive.

Helping someone else with trauma

This page is for friends and family supporting someone who has experienced trauma.

It can be hard if someone you care about is struggling with the effects of trauma. Or if they're in a long term, traumatic situation. But there are things you can do that might help.

This page has some suggestions for ways you can support them while also looking after your own wellbeing:

Be a good listener

When someone experiences trauma, it's important that they know the people close to them are there to listen. You don't always need to be able to give advice or have the answers to everything. Just being a good listener is a big help.

These are some tips:

- Give them time. Let them talk at their own pace – it's important not to pressure or rush them.
- Focus on listening. Try to respect what they're choosing to share, rather than waiting for your chance to talk.
- Accept their feelings. For example, allow them to be upset or angry about what's happened.
- Don't blame them or criticise their reactions. You might wonder why they didn't do something differently. But they survived however they could at the time.
- Use the same words they use. People vary in how they prefer to describe their experiences. For example, it's their choice whether to talk about being a 'victim' or 'survivor' of trauma.
- Don't dismiss their experiences. For example, don't tell them not to worry about things or that they're lucky for getting through it. Usually this isn't helpful to hear. Try to remember that people can't choose what they find traumatic or how they're affected.
- Only give advice if you're asked to. They might prefer to simply hear that you believe them and are there for them.
- Allow them to express themselves how they need to. Some of us might find it easier to express ourselves through writing or creative outlets. Supporting these ways of expressing feelings is just as valid.

Accepting that I can show my vulnerability without fear of reprisal or punishment has been a big step… to do this I have had to explain to those closest to me how vulnerable I am… and many times when I appear to be the exact opposite.

If someone talks to you about trauma, they might seem unemotional or casual. This could be even if they're talking about stressful or upsetting events. They might even smile or laugh.

This can seem strange or confusing. But it's a normal reaction. These responses can be part of a coping mechanism or physical response. For more information, see our page on the effects of trauma.

Hearing about trauma can be really hard, whether or not someone shares specific details. For example, you might feel upset or angry about what they've told you.

Our useful contacts are here to support you too. And you can read more about looking after your own mental health further down this page.

Manage your expectations

We might have our own ideas about what is traumatic. Or how someone should react to trauma, and how long it should take to get over it. But everyone is unique in how they experience trauma. And there's no right way to manage it or right amount of time to process it.

Experiencing effects at different times

Trauma doesn't affect everyone right away. Some of us may not feel it's impacting us until months or years later. We might feel like talking about it sometimes, but not at other times. This is perfectly normal.

Everyone works through trauma at their own speed. It's important to not have expectations about when someone should be 'better'. Or expect it to stop having an impact on their life.

It was only a few months into grief that I started apologising for it. My Facebook memories often start with ‘Sorry, I know people think I should be starting to feel better by now’ … but of course I wasn’t over my grief six months in

Changes to who they are

Experiencing trauma can change how someone thinks and feels, and their goals in life. It's important to understand that this change is normal. And not to pressure someone into returning to how they were before the trauma.

You might need to find new ways to spend time together. Or discover new, shared interests. Try not to think about this as 'losing' the person they were. We all change over time, and this could be a great way to try something new together.

A divorce after 27 years of marriage, being made homeless, having no money and being isolated, had made me into another person. Someone I didn’t recognise

Stigma and trauma

Some people feel unable to escape or talk about traumatic situations. This could be because of the stigma or beliefs of people around them. You may hold certain beliefs about what people should do in certain situations, such as beliefs about whether people should get divorced.

Everyone deserves to be free from harm and have a safe space to process their experiences. Try to think of someone's safety as the main priority and accept their needs. This is even if they don't make complete sense to you or match your beliefs.

Struggling with faith or spiritual beliefs

Trauma can lead some of us to struggle with our faith or spiritual beliefs. This could be the person who went through the trauma. Or you, if you're supporting that person.

Someone you know may have experienced trauma within a religious or spiritual community. To leave a traumatic environment, they may have to do things that are considered against certain religious teachings or beliefs. But this doesn't make them a bad person. Or mean you can't support them.

If you're struggling with this, there are people you can talk to. This could be someone from within your religious community, or outside of it. Our useful contacts page has organisations you could contact.

Try not to judge

It can be hard to understand why someone can't seem to 'move on' from trauma. Especially if you've not gone through trauma yourself. Or you feel differently about shared experiences.

It's understandable to wish things could improve. But it's important not to blame them or put pressure on them to get better without the time and support they need.

It's also important not to judge people if they don't react to trauma as strongly as you'd expect. Everyone has different reactions to trauma. And some of us may not be that affected by it.

Don't assume that someone needs professional help or certain types of support. And don't judge their reaction as them not having felt the impact of the trauma.

I wish there was more awareness of trauma and the way it affects a person's thought process and behaviour. [...] Self-preservation behaviours can be greatly misinterpreted or misunderstood.

Learn their triggers

It might help to ask if any situations or conversations might trigger flashbacks or difficult feelings. For example, they might feel distressed by loud noises or arguments.

Understanding their triggers could help you avoid these situations. Or help you support them when they do happen.

Tips on helping someone with flashbacks

Flashbacks are vivid experiences in which someone relives aspects of a traumatic event. It can be hard to know how to help during a flashback. But you don't need special training. It could help if you:

- Try to stay calm
- Gently tell them that they're having a flashback
- Avoid making any sudden movements
- Encourage them to breathe slowly and deeply
- Encourage them to describe their surroundings
- Reassure them that they're safe

Our pages on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) explain more about what flashbacks are. There are also tips for coping with flashbacks.

Offer practical support

Someone may need practical support following a traumatic event. Trauma can impact our ability to think clearly and organise. Doing things like cooking or cleaning can help.

But it's important to make sure that the person you're supporting still has control. And has a say in what happens around them. Try not to take over.

If you're worried about someone, it's understandable to want to help them improve things. Or to feel frustrated if they disagree about what to do. But traumatic experiences usually involve being powerless or having control taken away from you.

If you pressure them or tell them what to do, this might add to their feelings of powerlessness. Instead, try to encourage and support them to make their own choices.

Accepting support from those closest to me has been tough [because] I always had to be the strong one.

Respect their privacy and boundaries

Don't share details of what they've gone through unless you have their permission. For example, they might not want you to tell mutual friends or family members about what has happened to them.

They might also not want to discuss their experience with you at all, even if you're close. Try not to take this personally. Reassure them that you're there if they need you.

This doesn't mean you need to keep everything to yourself and not get support. Our useful contacts for trauma and useful contacts for supporting someone else have some suggestions of where you can get help.

Help them set boundaries

Someone who has experienced certain forms of trauma might have difficulty saying 'no' to things they don't want to do. This might come from a time during the trauma when they needed to please people to say safe. Or they may feel they need to say 'yes' to everything to keep people close to them.

Reassure them that it's ok to say 'no' to things. Give them time to respond and process the request, rather than demanding an answer right away. Talk to them about what things they do and don't like doing. Allow them to help plan events with their needs in mind.

Engage in fun and relaxing activities

Someone recovering from trauma might have a lot of difficult things to manage. When you spend time with them, try to include activities that are enjoyable to do and separate from the trauma.

They might not always want to do this. You'll need to consider their boundaries. But finding ways to engage them in fun and relaxing activities can be very helpful.

My father and my mental health

When my anxiety was really bad, or I was having panic attacks, my dad would always hug me and talk it all through to help me calm down. He always had a way to reassure me that nothing like that is going to ever happen to me again

Read Catrin's blog

Help them find support

If they want you to, you could help them find support. For example:

- You could look through the list of relevant organisations in our useful contacts for trauma.
- Our pages on supporting someone who is self-harming can help if someone is harming themselves. We also have pages on supporting someone who feels suicidal, if they're struggling with thoughts of suicide.

See our pages on helping someone else seek help for more suggestions, including what you can and can't do if someone doesn't want help.

How to Help Someone with Trauma

- Ways to help
- What to say and avoid
- Help them get help
- Next steps

It's not always easy to know how to help after a traumatic event, but there are many ways you can support your loved one.

It can be difficult seeing your loved one experiencing the effects of trauma. Not knowing how to help them can interfere with giving the much-needed social support that loved ones can provide.

Whether the person affected by trauma is a spouse or partner, family member, or friend, equipping yourself with the correct information can be the first step to helping your loved one.

How can I help?

Trauma is a prevalent and almost universal occurrence. According to the Sidran Institute, around 70% of adults in the United States experience a traumatic event in their lifetimes, and around 20% of them go on to develop symptoms that meet the criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Trauma isn't just about the traumatic event that occurred but also the response to it. There can be a sense of helplessness when seeing your loved one deal with trauma.

Below is a list of tips you can use to help support your loved one after a traumatic event.

Get informed about the effects of trauma

Although the vast amount of information can feel overwhelming, the first step in helping your loved one is to get informed about trauma. A general understanding of what trauma is and how it can impact lives can go a long way in helping.

While you don't need to know everything about trauma to help your loved one, you need to be informed.

The term "trauma" doesn't just mean PTSD. Trauma is often used as an umbrella term that can refer to the traumatic event itself, extremely high levels of general stress in response to an event, or PTSD (a specific set of experiences in response to an event). Some people recover quickly from a traumatic event, but others may have lasting difficulties.

The American Psychological Association (APA) describes trauma as an emotional response to a terrible event like an accident, sexual assault, or natural disaster.

Complex trauma refers to a particular set of symptoms resulting from what may often be multiple events, such as physical, emotional, or sexual abuse. The stress of complex trauma can negatively affect a person's relationships, work life, and physical health.

Severe traumatic experiences can cause the condition PTSD. According to the National Institute for Mental Health (NIMH)Trusted Source, PTSD is defined as a condition that develops in some people who've experienced (or witnessed) a shocking, frightening, or dangerous event.

After experiencing a traumatic event, people may have different emotional responses. Some of the more common responses to trauma are:

- nightmares, which can involve a common theme from the event or associated feelings
- distressing and intrusive memories
- flashbacks, which are relatively rare
- increased feelings of anxiousness
- self-blame, or blaming others for the event
- avoiding things that remind you of trauma, such as places or people
- difficulty concentrating
- dissociation, where they seem to withdraw or shut down
- sleep disturbances
- difficulty feeling happiness

If you notice these responses in your loved one, know that this is normal. Receiving the right support from a therapist can help reduce their impact.

After a trauma, people may experience triggers, which can be anything that reminds them of the event and results in an emotional response or PTSD symptom.

Sometimes, triggers can set off memories and physical symptoms where your loved one relives the event. Triggers may not always be evident to others, as triggers tend to elicit internal experiences, like emotional or physical discomfort.

Support them by listening

Try to support your loved one with active listening.

Active listening is less about responding and more about attentively focusing on what's shared. Listening to your loved one without judgment or pressure can go a long way in helping them.

Support their need for space

After a traumatic event, it's common to lose a sense of safety. Your loved one might feel anxious and be on guard. Be mindful of their personal space. Avoid touching, like giving hugs, without their expressed permission.

Space can also refer to emotional space, which can be very important for supporting a loved one. An example of emotional space would be not pressuring them to speak about

the experience of the event or their PTSD reactions but letting them know you're there if they need you.

Support them by being present

If you're present without any expectations about how they respond to triggers or express their emotions, you can offer your support and be attentive to any emotional or behavioral changes with your loved one. This also allows you to learn what their triggers (if any) are. Allow space for their pain.

Be patient

Initially, after a traumatic event, a person might not know what they need. It's best to avoid assuming you know what the person needs. If unsure, it's best just to ask. An excellent way to be supportive is to practice being patient.

Offer help with routine tasks

Being supportive can extend past talking. A common symptom of PTSD is difficulty concentrating, so you can offer to help with daily tasks, like preparing meals, shopping, or cleaning.

Practice self-care

It's essential to maintain your wellness and self-care practices while supporting your loved one's needs. Trauma affects the person involved in the traumatic event, but the impact can extend to loved ones.

Secondary trauma is when you're experiencing emotional distress from witnessing or having knowledge of a loved one's traumatic event. It's important to remember to look after yourself while caring for others.

What to say (and what not to say)

While you may have good intentions, sometimes certain comments can hurt more than help.

You're not expected to say everything perfectly. The goal is to support your loved one by reassuring safety and trust.

It can help to actively remind your loved one that you're there for them if they need you, but without pressuring them.

Below are some suggestions of what to say and avoid when talking with someone who has experienced trauma.

Consider saying something like the following:

- “I’m here for you.”
- “How can I help you right now?”
- “Thank you for trusting me to share this.”
- “I believe you” or “I believe in you.”
- “I’m here to listen.”
- “You are loved.”

Consider avoiding the following comments:

- Dismissive comments, like “It wasn’t that bad” or “Just move on.”
- “You’re lucky,” “Look on the bright side,” or, “It could’ve been worse.”
- Assumptions, like “I know how you feel” or “It’s all in your head.”
- Judgmental statements, like “You shouldn’t have done that” or “You shouldn’t be angry.”

How to help your loved one get help

It can be challenging to see your loved one deal with trauma. You might feel that it’s your job to take their pain away or “cure” them, but as humans, we simply can’t do that, no matter how hard we try.

After experiencing trauma, many people benefit from seeking professional mental health support.

Some people who experience symptoms after a traumatic event may find that the symptoms resolve on their own with little intervention. While the emotional responses noted above are common, it might be time for help from a therapist who specializes in trauma if they last more than a few months after the event.

Therapists with a specialty in trauma have particular skill sets and approaches to therapy that can help people who are experiencing post-traumatic stress.

Some types of therapy have been specifically developed for people with symptoms of post-traumatic stress.

The following approaches or modalities have been shown to have the most promise for people who’ve experienced trauma:

- cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT)
- cognitive processing therapy (CPT)
- prolonged exposure (PE)
- trauma-focused CBT (TF-CBT) for children
- Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR)

In addition to therapy, current research also supports the use of holistic practices, like trauma-informed mindfulness, meditation, and trauma-informed yoga, as supplementary treatments.

A 2021 study indicated that meditation promoted emotional regulation. This pathway started with increased awareness of their emotions, involved accepting them and letting go of their feelings, and ended with emotional growth and improved self-regulation.

A 2016 studyTrusted Source indicated that yoga might be helpful to regain mental and physical health, foster well-being, relieve trauma-related symptoms, and cultivate personal growth after interpersonal trauma.

Next steps

Support and professional interventions can significantly slow down and alleviate the effects of traumatic events.

It's essential to learn about trauma or PTSD to understand why it happens, how it's treated, and what you can do to help. Dealing with trauma and the shifts in family life are stressful. Remembering to take care of yourself makes it easier to show up fully for your loved one.

Listed below is additional information on trauma and some helpful support resources.