How to Help a Friend: 
A Guide for Students

If you have a friend who is struggling emotionally, not coping well or using drugs or alcohol to escape, it’s important to understand that unaddressed emotional health problems can have serious consequences. These problems can make it hard to succeed in work or school and lead to addiction, dangerous behaviors, or thoughts of suicide. Here are some tips for helping a friend if they come to you for support.

Learn the Warning Signs
Balancing all life’s demands — school, work, relationships — can be stressful and many people get overwhelmed, anxious and overexerted – so it can be tough to tell if a friend is just dealing with the everyday challenges of life or struggling with a larger problem. A friend in trouble might need professional help to develop better coping and stress management skills, or they may be dealing with conditions like depression, bipolar disorder, and anxiety disorders that generally require attention and treatment.

Common signs that a friend needs help:

- Depression or apathy that interferes with obligations or participating in social activities
- Lack of coping skills around day-to-day problems or extreme reactions to certain situations
- Extreme highs, referred to as mania, that may include rushed thoughts, bursts of energy, sleeplessness and compulsive behavior (like excessive spending or risky sexual behavior)
- Severe anxiety or stress
- Constant feelings of sadness or hopelessness
- Increased use of alcohol or drugs

If you are concerned that a friend is thinking about harming themselves or someone else, it is important that you don’t try and deal with that situation alone.

You can call the BHN Crisis Line at (413)733-6661 or the Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-TALK for guidance anytime 24/7.
If you are on campus during office hours call the Counseling Center at (413)565-1544.

If you are on campus after office hours, call Campus Public Safety at (413)565-1225.

*If there is an immediate threat of harm, or you are off campus, call 911.*

How to Help a Friend
How you respond to a friend or classmate who is showing signs of emotional distress or a potential problem is often dependent on your relationship with that person. If you have a long history and friendship with the person, you may be a key resource for support and feel comfortable having a discussion with your friend about how they are feeling. If the person struggling is a more recent acquaintance, like a roommate or classmate, your role may involve letting someone else know about the problem.

Share Your Concerns
Share your observations with your friend. Focus on being nonjudgmental, compassionate and understanding. Use these “I” (instead of “you”) comments to get the conversation started.

- I’ve noticed you’re [sleeping more, eating less, etc.]. Is everything okay?
- I've noticed that you haven't been acting like yourself lately. Is something going on?
- It makes me afraid to hear you talking like this. Let’s talk to someone about it.
Reach Out to Someone You Trust
If a friend is in need, you don’t need to go at it alone. Involve others who can provide added support. Try to find someone who might be understanding of your friend’s situation or be able to help. Your friend may feel cornered if you start involving others, so make sure to talk to your friend first.

However, if it’s an emergency, you should:
- If on campus: call Campus Public Safety at (413)565-1225.
- If off campus: call 911.

If there is no immediate threat of harm, here are some people you may consider reaching out to:
- Friends and family
- Professors
- Campus counselors
- Faith-based leaders
- Coaches

Offer Support
Keep in mind that your friend might not be ready to talk about what they’re going through or simply may not want your help right now. You cannot force someone to get help, so just do your best to be there with your friend through their journey and be ready if and when they do finally reach out. It may be helpful to offer specific things that might help, such as:
- How can I best support you right now? Is there something I can do or can we involve others who can help?
- Can I help you find mental health services and supports? Can I help you make an appointment?
- Can I help you with the stuff you need to get done until you’re feeling better?
- Would you like me to go with you to a support group or a meeting? Do you need a ride to any of your appointments?

You can play an important role in helping a friend build a positive, social support network. For example:
- Check-in regularly. Call or text your friend once or twice a week. Check in with them after their therapy appointments to see how things went. Let them know that you are there.
- Include your friend in your plans. Even if your friend doesn’t always come, they will probably appreciate being included.
- Learn more about mental health conditions. Find out more about what your friend is going through so you are better able to help in future situations.
- Avoid using judgmental or dismissive language, such as “you’ll get over it,” “toughen up,” “snap out of it.” Your friend needs to hear that they are not alone and that they can get through this. Reassure them that everything will be okay and that you are there for them.

It is important to remember that you aren’t a therapist and it isn’t your job to provide treatment.

Your role is to be supportive and encourage them to reach out to family, the counseling center or another medical professional as a first step — even if you don’t fully understand the problem or its severity.
You can be the difference in helping a friend who needs support but is too afraid to seek help. Just a simple conversation can go a long way in helping your friend. You can make a huge difference in someone’s life.

Special thanks to Half of Us and NAMI for language borrowed from their websites.

Revised 8/14/19