

# Helping someone else



**Anna Freud**  
National Centre for  
Children and Families

# Supporting friends with their mental health



1 in 10 young people will go through periods of feeling emotionally unwell during any given year, but what do you do when this is your friend or relative?

We understand it can be hard to know what to do when someone you care about is going through a rough patch, so we have put together some tips and advice, with the help of young people from mental health support group Hearts & Minds.

The following pages include some information on how to talk to someone you're worried about, how to look after yourself during this time and how to seek help from an adult if you become seriously worried. In each section, you can read quotations that come directly from young people who have experience coping with similar situations.



# How to talk to someone you're worried about

- 1 First of all, make sure you are looking after yourself. You cannot help someone else if you're not feeling well. There is more advice on this on [page 5](#), and you can also search for support or information online using our [Youth Wellbeing Directory](#).
- 2 If you're worried about someone, be honest. Use a calm, normal tone. You could say, 'You've been seeming down, and I just wanted to check you're okay?'
- 3 When you ask someone how they're doing, try to make sure it's a private space where they won't need to worry about someone else overhearing.
- 4 Sometimes these conversations can feel awkward and that's okay. Take your time and figure it out together—there is no one 'correct' answer.
- 5 Let them know they are not alone and that, whatever they say, you aren't judging them. You could share your own experiences if it feels relevant but make sure it doesn't take over the conversation.
- 6 If they avoid answering or don't want to talk about it, make sure you don't pressure them into talking. That can make someone feel anxious.
- 7 Give them space if they need it. Sometimes when someone is emotional, they might need time to process everything and calm down before talking about it.
- 8 Whether they do or don't open up to you, carry on being your normal self. This will show them that how you feel about them hasn't changed, and that you just want them to be okay.
- 9 Avoid interrupting them or giving them too much advice. This can feel overwhelming—different things are helpful for different people. If you're unsure of what to say, you could ask, 'Do you want advice or just someone to listen?' Either is okay, but I just want to check.'

**"Don't wait for something to happen, let them know you're there for them."**

**"If someone keeps pressing me when I don't want to talk, I make more of an effort to hide anything that's going on."**

- 10 If you can, give them an idea of who else they could talk to. Our [Youth Wellbeing Directory](#) can provide information on what support is available. If they end up talking to someone else instead, that doesn't reflect badly on you or your friendship—sometimes it's just the right time and place.
- 11 If you want to recommend somewhere they can get support, don't just give them a name and location. It can feel intimidating going somewhere new so, if you can, explain what it is like and how it works. If you feel comfortable, offer to go with them—but give them the option to say no: 'I could come with you if that would help, but no worries if it would feel awkward.'
- 12 If you need to talk about the situation, make sure you do so for the right reasons. Avoid gossiping—it's their situation to share, not yours.
- 13 If they say or do something that makes you feel really concerned about their safety, tell an adult you trust. An example of this could be if you feel worried to leave them or let them go home after school. There is more information on this across the page.

**"Sometimes doing something with someone can mean more than talking—just do something nice for them and then they can open up in their own time."**



## How to talk to an adult if you're worried about a friend or relative

- 1 If you can, let them know you are worried and would like to tell an adult. Perhaps you could discuss with them who they'd prefer you to speak to, so they don't feel as though they've lost control: 'If I have to tell someone, who do you want me to tell?' So it feels like you're doing it together.
- 2 If they agree to speak to an adult, offer to go with them. Talking to an adult can feel intimidating and make things feel more serious, so they may appreciate the support.
- 3 If they refuse and ask you to keep it a secret, trust your instincts. If it feels too risky or overwhelming, it's important you let someone else know.
- 4 Weigh up your decision. Remember your friend or relative's safety, as well as your own wellbeing, should come before the worry that telling someone might affect your relationship.
- 5 They may be grateful to you in the future when looking back and realising they weren't safe.
- 6 Remember that although you can't tell them what to do, you can explain why you need to tell someone else and stand by your decision. You don't need to feel guilty for making sure someone is safe. Professionals like teachers or other staff may need to do the same thing. You can find out more about confidentiality [here](#).

**"At the end of the day, I'd rather someone be safe and not be my friend, than not be safe."**

**"Sometimes when I'm going through things I don't realise how much someone else is going out of their way to help me—but when I've been happier, I've realised."**



# How to look after yourself when you're worried about a friend or relative



- 1 At the start of the conversation, make sure you are prepared and well enough yourself to hear them out.
- 2 Looking after your friend or relative is not all on your shoulders. Think about who else may be able to support them.
- 3 As much as you care about your friend, a friendship needs to be balanced. It's okay that one person's needs come first for a little while if they're having a tough time, but a healthy friendship will come back to the middle.
- 4 Signs that your friendship has become unbalanced could include:

**"Sometimes being a good friend can be pointing someone to getting professional support and not taking it all on yourself."**

- You're thinking about their problems so much you are finding it difficult to concentrate
- Conversations are always about them and they never ask about you
- You feel undervalued and they haven't been appreciating or respecting you

- 5 If you feel anxious or guilty, try to think about what you might advise a friend in your situation. Sometimes we are kinder to others than we are to ourselves!
- 6 Supporting someone else can be draining. It's important to make sure you have support too. This might be a friend, or a professional like a counsellor, GP or teacher.

**"All friendships will go up and down but if you start to feel like it's too much and you're in too deep it's best to be honest with them."**

**"Sometimes external support can be helpful, rather than a friendship becoming too intense."**

**"If someone's vulnerable with me, my natural response is to feel more comfortable to share with them because it feels equal."**

**"It's natural to feel nervous about having this kind of conversation with someone."**





**My mental health is not me,  
it's just a part of me. At the end  
of the day, a diagnosis is just a  
sheet of paper—it doesn't define  
me or mean that everything I do  
is because of that.**



**Finding support:**

Samaritans: 116 123 / [www.samaritans.org](http://www.samaritans.org)  
Childline: 0800 1111 / [www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk)

Details on how to  
find urgent help are  
available [here](#).

**Youth Wellbeing Directory:**  
[youthwellbeing.co.uk](http://youthwellbeing.co.uk)

**About the Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families:**

**The Anna Freud National Centre for Children and Families**  
has developed and delivered pioneering mental health care  
for over 60 years.

**Our aim is to transform current mental health provision in the UK**  
by improving the quality, accessibility and effectiveness of treatment.

**We believe** that every child and their family should be at the heart  
of the care they receive, working in partnership with professionals.

Our Patron: **Her Royal Highness The Duchess of Cambridge**

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