

# Helping a Friend in Distress



## 7 Ways to Support a Friend Going Through Tough Times

It's human nature to want to help someone in need, especially when it's a friend or loved one. For most of us, witnessing someone else's stress or heartache can trigger an internal response to take action and ease their suffering.

Mental health care is directly connected to social support. Human beings are hard-wired for connection and a sense of belonging and purpose. Friends and acquaintances can help provide these all-important factors, helping those with mental health issues feel less alone. This often includes bonding over shared interests, hobbies, values or beliefs, according to the National Alliance on Mental Illness.

But even in the closest of friendships, it can be hard to know how to help a friend who is experiencing mental health issues. Every person and mental health situation is different, so it can be easy for a well-meaning comment to unintentionally make a distressed friend or colleague feel worse.



### Meet Mariana Prutton, LMFT.

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If someone you care about is in emotional distress, there are actionable steps you can take to support them. Here are seven practical ways to help a friend in need.

### **1. Speak from the heart about your concerns.**

Let your concerns be your guide, expressing them in a way that doesn't carry judgment. Starting with something as simple as telling your friend you're worried or that you care and want to be there for them can go a long way.

It can also be helpful to prepare for the conversation beforehand, recalling any observations about your friend's behavior that have been concerning you. Maybe your friend seems constantly down or tired, or you've noticed other behavior that's out of character for them, like withdrawing from friends or excessive alcohol use. The goal is to communicate these concerns in a way that won't make them feel judged. Give them your full attention, and resist the urge to offer unsolicited advice.

Instead, ask questions and listen to what your friend has to say. That means avoiding any temptation to interject and giving them the space to share freely. This kind of communication is rooted in empathy and respect for your friend's experience and feelings, and is an authentic way to establish trust.

Lastly, if your friend declines to open up or insists that they're fine, it's important to respect that boundary and not pry. Instead, try following up with a statement that expresses your understanding of what they've told you, and an offer to be a safe source of support in case of future need. You may also try normalizing professional mental health support, particularly given the collective stress experienced over the past year, and frame it as a viable option in case they ever need it at some point down the line.

### **2. Acknowledge how hard it can be to find mental health care.**

For many, seeking the help of a mental health care professional is easier said than done. Not everyone has easy access to the right care, while others may be afraid of being judged by others, which can stop them from reaching out for help.

It's very possible your friend is experiencing some of these feelings. The more you can normalize mental health care and eliminate the shame surrounding it, the more people can feel good about getting the care they need. Acknowledge whatever your friend is feeling and if you're comfortable, consider opening up about your own experiences seeking mental health support. It's a small act of vulnerability that can have a big impact.

### **3. Offer to help your friend explore solutions for care.**

If your friend is open to seeking mental health care but seems overwhelmed, you can support them by helping them navigate their options. This can include guiding them to determine if

they have access to an Employee Assistance Program (EAP). Do their employee benefits include mental health offerings? If so, what does that look like?

You can point your friend to their health insurance plan to get a list of in-network providers. If you're seeing a mental health care provider yourself, you can also consider asking them for referrals that might be a good match for your friend's needs. Similarly, your friend can ask their own primary care physician if they can recommend anyone.

#### **4. Remind your friend to set realistic expectations.**

Therapy isn't a one-and-done solution. Instead, it's based on establishing a trusted relationship with a therapist, then committing to learning skills and doing the inner work you discuss during sessions. Finding the right therapist can take time, and that's OK. It's also OK if their path to recovery takes some time.

If they're nervous about their first appointment, helping your friend understand what to expect from their first therapy session can help ease their worries. The therapist will probably inquire about what brought them to therapy and ask questions to better understand their motivations and needs. Contrary to popular stereotypes, this won't have to mean lying on a couch and delving into their childhood. Instead, the therapist's aim will be to create a comfortable environment in which to gather some basic information. With that said, the more open and honest your friend is able to be, the better they can work with their therapist to set realistic goals and a tailored treatment plan.

It's also important for your friend to understand that there are many different types of evidence-based therapies. What works for one patient may not work for another, but being receptive to different styles can help them determine the treatment that feels right for them.

#### **5. Check in on your friend (without overwhelming them or yourself).**

Be sure to check in on your friend over time so they know they aren't alone. This doesn't have to mean calling them daily or asking them for specific details about their therapy sessions, as this may overwhelm them—and you. Something as simple as a text message can let them know you're there if they want to talk.

Be a consistent source of support, which includes asking them if they'd like to do something fun together. You can also share crisis lines and other immediate mental health resources in case they're unable to connect with you when they need it during a critical moment.

Another great way to offer support is to identify your friend's love language — and then act on it. Depending on what that looks like, you can do little things to show them you care. This can include sending them a gift, spending quality time together, dropping off dinner, sending words of affirmation, or (with their consent) giving them a big hug.

Keep in mind that it's one thing to be there for your friend; it's another to put your own mental health in jeopardy trying to solve their problems. Check in with yourself to see if you notice any feelings of emotional burnout. If you feel yourself taking on too much, it's OK to reduce the time you spend on this friendship and dial up your own self-care. You may need to draw some

boundaries, but that doesn't mean you're abandoning your friend. For example, you could share feelings of the friendship becoming one-sided and offer to collaborate on how you could both navigate that going forward.

## 6. Remember these dos and don'ts when listening to your friend.

It's important to do so in a way that makes them feel heard and validated. Let these dos and don'ts be your guide for healthy conversations:

### DO:

- Validate their pain and struggle without dismissing it or presenting them with unwanted positivity
- Ask what would be helpful – do they want you to problem-solve or just listen?
- Before giving advice, ask what they've already done
- Share a similar experience if you have one—remember though, do it skillfully so you're not one-upping them or taking the spotlight. The point is to use your experience to express empathy.

### DON'T:

- Dismiss or minimize their issues.  
Avoid comments like:  
"You'll be fine."  
"That's not that bad."  
"Relax."  
"Don't be sad!"
- Jump straight into problem-solving or advice-giving
- Blame them for their problems

## 7. Remember that ultimately, your friend's mental health is outside of your control.

When all is said and done, it's up to your friend to follow through with seeking help. While you can certainly be a trusted and reliable source of support, their healing is ultimately up to them. This requires intrinsic motivation on your friend's part, and an internal desire to take control of their mental health. This can be difficult to accept, especially if you're watching someone you care about really struggle with feelings of despair or hopelessness. It can be equally hard to witness self-destructive behavior, but in the end, the onus is on your friend to seek professional help and take positive action.

Remember that helping a friend in distress is about being a consistent and reliable source of support. Showing up and being vulnerable yourself can mean the world to a friend in need.

Lyra is here to support you in having difficult conversations with your loved ones. Enroll today at [care.lyrahealth.com](https://care.lyrahealth.com).