

# HELPING A FRIEND YOU'RE WORRIED ABOUT

We all need support in our lives. Our friends and supporters are there to celebrate successes and help us through difficult times. When a friend seems to be struggling or is experiencing a mental health problem, they may be feeling alone, so support from a friend like you is even more important.

Remember that your role as a friend is not the same as a mental health professional. You are there to support your friend and help them find professionals that can help.

Helping a friend doesn't mean:

- Trying to diagnose them
- Giving medical or treatment advice
- Making decisions for your friend
- Solving all of your friend's problems
- Telling them to just stop feeling like they do
- Minimizing how they feel, even if you don't understand it

## So how can I help?

### **You can tell them that you're worried.**

If you're concerned about a friend, it's important to tell them what changes you've noticed that have you worried and ask them

what's happening without making any assumptions. They may have a very different idea of what they're experiencing, or you may simply not have all of the information. Some people have a hard time talking about their experiences, but it's still important to ask what you can do to help. Let them tell you what they need.

### **You can be there to listen.**

When people are going through something difficult or confusing—like a possible mental illness or alcohol or drug problem—simply talking through the experiences and sharing thoughts can be very helpful. As a friend, you can be there to listen without judgement (that last part is the hardest). You may feel like you have to give advice. Resist the urge. Instead, just listen and be there. Once in a while, reflect back what you hear so they know you're listening. Ask questions instead of commenting.

It's important to remember that some people want to talk while others may not. Remember that pushing someone to share their feelings can cause more harm than good.

“Your friend may be feeling alone, so support from a friend like you is important.”



### **You can learn together.**

Learning more about mental health and mental illnesses can help people who experience challenges take care of themselves. It can also help friends understand what another person is experiencing and how they can really help.

Learning together may be as simple as finding a few books or trustworthy websites and reading them together. You can also find education events and courses through local mental health organizations, schools, and campuses.

### **You can share experiences.**

If you've experienced a similar health concern in the past, or if you're currently seeking support for a concern, you probably have a lot of insight on how you deal with challenges and stay well. Maybe you know a service provider that really helped you or know a great organization in your community. This kind of information is really helpful for other people. It gives people ideas that they can try out in their own lives, and it also helps people see that they aren't alone. Just remember that each person is unique. You can empathize with some of their experience, but you can't know exactly what they're feeling.



### **What if a friend isn't ready to find help?**

This can be a hard situation. You can see that a friend is having problems, but you feel like they aren't doing anything about it. People naturally think of what might be causing the problem and wonder why their friend won't seek help, but remember that isn't your job to diagnose an illness or give treatment advice. Accusing or confronting a friend likely isn't going to help anyone. If you decide to talk with a friend, remember to be supportive, calm, and non-judgemental. Here are more tips to try:

- ☐ Ask your friend if they've been having problems lately, and let them know that you're a good person to talk to when they're ready.
- ☐ Instead of giving your friend a list of problems you've noticed, talk in terms of how you've been affected. Instead of saying, "You don't do anything anymore!" you might try, "I feel hurt when you cancel our plans at the last minute. Is something going on?"
- ☐ Respond to problems that they bring up. For example, if they complain about feeling like they can't concentrate at school, you might suggest talking about that problem with someone who can help, like a teacher or school counsellor.
- ☐ There may be another person in your friend's life that they really respect and seek out when they need advice. That person may have also noticed changes and may have more of an influence.
- ☐ Find a way to talk that makes it easier to talk about the harder stuff. For one person, it may be texting in the evening. For someone else, it may be going for a walk or going to a coffee shop.

If you're really concerned about a friend, talk with an adult you trust, like a teacher, your school counsellor or a parent. Your friend may be angry that you brought others into the situation, but it's more important to keep people safe.

Unless your friend is in danger of hurting themselves or someone else, there's one more important point to keep in mind. Even if a friend does have a mental illness, it's their right to decide how they are going to deal with it, even if you don't agree with their choice.

### **You can offer practical help.**

When people are dealing with a mental health problem, they may not be able to do everything that they'd like. Ask if your friend needs any help with daily tasks. Even small things like taking a friend to an appointment or returning their library books can make a big difference.

### **Where can I find help?**

One of the most important things you can do for a friend (or any other people in your life) is connecting them with services.

#### **At school**

Your school's counsellor is a good place to start. Some schools offer their own programs for students. Your school's counsellor can also recommend services or organizations in your community that can help. But if you feel more comfortable talking with a particular teacher or staff member, they can also help connect you with services and supports.

If you aren't comfortable talking with someone at school, you can call or phone line or chat online. Youth in BC ([youthinbc.com](http://youthinbc.com)) and the Kids Help Phone ([kidshelpphone.ca](http://kidshelpphone.ca)) are two good options. They are there to listen, and they can suggest services or other helpful places to go in your area.

#### **On campus**

Campuses have counselling departments that support students who need help. You can also find services through your campus' health and wellness services, or your student union or student services society. Depending on the situation, disability services can also help, especially with practical help and assistance like note-taking and test-taking. Some campuses host education events, peer support or support groups, and other useful options. If a friend is having problems with conflict (like

a problem with an instructor), the campus ombudsperson can help everyone work towards a resolution.

#### **In the community**

A family doctor is often the first person someone sees for mental health concerns. Try contacting a local mental health organization for support services like support groups, programs to help people who experience a mental illness, or programs to support loved ones. They're also a great place to get insider advice and suggestions you might not have considered. You'll find contact information for mental health organizations in BC at [www.heretohelp.bc.ca](http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca). For good health information, HealthLink BC is a good option. Call 811 to talk to a registered nurse, or visit [www.healthlinkbc.ca](http://www.healthlinkbc.ca). You can find resources for young people through Kelty Mental Health. Visit [www.keltymentalhealth.ca](http://www.keltymentalhealth.ca) or call 1-800-665-1822.

#### **In an emergency or crisis**

If you are concerned about a friend's immediate safety, call 911.

If you are concerned about a friend but they are not in immediate danger, call your local crisis line. They are trained to help in a crisis and emergency, and they offer advice and community resources. To connect with a crisis line in BC, call 310-6789.

If a friend experiences thoughts of suicide or talks about suicide, call 1-800-SUICIDE. They are trained to help you cope with the situation and help your friend.

Depending on your friend's situation, they may work with their health care provider to make a crisis plan. Crisis plans usually outline what will happen when someone feels unwell. Ask your friend if they have a plan in place so you know what to do, if needed.

## Taking care of yourself

Supporting someone else can affect your own well-being. It's normal to feel overwhelmed, upset, or angry when someone you care about experiences difficulties, so it's important to take care of your own health, too. Small steps like getting enough sleep, getting some exercise, and spending time on activities you enjoy are good for everyone. If you're having a hard time, seek support for yourself. Any of the places in the 'Where can I find help?' section of this info sheet are good places to start.

An important part of any relationship is boundaries. Even though you want to help, it's important to think about your limits, such as what you're not willing to put up with or what you aren't willing to do. For example, it's reasonable (and healthy!) to ask that a friend not call you after a certain time. Have an open conversation so that everyone is clear. Remember to reevaluate your boundaries and make changes, if needed. What worked at one point may not work in a month or a year.



## Where can I find more information?

### HeretoHelp

Visit [www.heretohelp.bc.ca](http://www.heretohelp.bc.ca) to learn more about supporting a loved one, learn more about mental health, mental illnesses and substances, take a screening self-test and find resources in BC.

### Kelty Mental Health

Visit [www.keltymentalhealth.ca](http://www.keltymentalhealth.ca) to find resources and help for and about young people, or to talk to a Youth in Residence peer support worker—a young adult who's been there.

### Youth in BC

Visit [www.youthinbc.com](http://www.youthinbc.com) to chat online with a volunteer (every day from 12:00 pm to 1:00 am). You can also talk with someone at any time at 1-866-661-3311 or 604-872-3311 (in the Lower Mainland). You'll also find information on mental health on their website.

### Mindcheck

Visit [www.mindcheck.ca](http://www.mindcheck.ca) to learn more about mental health and mental illnesses, take self-tests, and find help. This site for young people has a section just for friends with advice and ideas to help you support people you care about.

### Mental Health Support Line

Call 310-6789 (do not add 604, 778 or 250 before the number) 24 hours a day to connect to a BC crisis line, without a wait or busy signal. The crisis lines linked in through 310-6789 have training in mental health issues and services. They can help in a crisis situation, but they are also there to listen if you just need to talk, and they can help you find resources in your area.



**heretohelp**

Mental health and substance use  
information you can trust

### BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information

HeretoHelp is a project of the BC Partners for Mental Health and Addictions Information. The BC Partners are a group of nonprofit agencies working together to help individuals and families manage mental health and substance use problems, with the help of good quality information. We represent AnxietyBC, BC Schizophrenia Society, Canadian Mental Health Association's BC Division, Centre for Addictions Research of BC, FORCE Society for Kids' Mental Health, Jessie's Legacy Program at Family Services of the North Shore, and Mood Disorders Association of BC. The BC Partners are funded by BC Mental Health and Substance Use Services, an agency of the Provincial Health Services Authority.