

Supporting friends - a guide

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Content notice: this guide contains discussions of mental health that some people may find distressing.

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General

Starting conversations

Checking in with how friends are feeling regularly, and encouraging responses that go deeper than a simple 'alright' or 'not bad' is a good start. This encourages a relationship of talking and listening, so that if a friend is struggling, they will feel more comfortable approaching you. This can take place either in real life, or by phoning, messaging or emailing.

If things don't seem okay with a friend, you may have to probe, asking open questions and seeking clarification if necessary. If you don't feel you are close enough a friend to do this directly, maybe talk to a closer friend.

Examples of open questions you could ask:

- When did this happen? / How long has this been going on for?
- Has this happened before?
- How do you feel about that?
- Have you thought about what to do?
- What options do you have? / Can we talk through the options?
- Is there anything I can do?

If a friend does not want to talk, respect this decision, but let them know that they can come back to you if they change their mind, and keep checking in.

Having conversations

Active listening is extremely beneficial when talking to friends in any context, but especially when supporting them. It can help your friend organise their thoughts, reflect on their options, and make their problems seem more manageable.

General principles

- Be warm and attentive
- Don't make assumptions or judgements
- Validate their experiences and don't dismiss them, even if they seem small
- Acknowledge the negatives of their situation, and don't erase their struggles
- Highlighting some positives can be nice, even if the only positive is that they don't have to go through their struggles alone
- Non-verbal communication is important, such as nodding, making noises of encouragement, and focussing your attention
- Remain as calm as possible
- Allow them to cry, and ask if they want physical comfort
- Try not to encourage coping mechanisms which are harmful like drinking or drug use

- Share similar experiences if relevant, but don't make them the focus. Be supportive, rather than competitive
- Summarise and clarify information as you go

Boundaries

<https://welldoing.org/article/how-keep-healthy-boundaries-friend-in-need>

When a friend is struggling, it can be tempting to compromise your own welfare in looking out for them, and while wanting to help a friend is definitely a good thing, it's important to remember that there must always be boundaries in place, so that you don't put yourself at risk while giving support.

Supporting an ill friend should never take priority over your own basic wellbeing - for example, you shouldn't feel obliged to be available 24 hours a day for them. It can be hard to impose these boundaries sometimes, but it's essential that you always keep your own welfare as a priority.

In the short term, putting someone else's welfare above your own may seem like a good decision, but in the long term it can become very unhealthy for you, and you won't be able to support a friend properly if you're struggling too much with your own issues. It's thus better for both of you in the long term if there are effective boundaries in place.

If you are worried that your own wellbeing might be at risk as a result of your friend's situation, then signposting is one of the best things that you can do to support a friend.

Signposting

When friends are struggling with mental health issues, it can be tempting to try and fix their situation yourself. However, it is important to remember that someone with a serious illness needs medical support, and there are limits on what you can do. Someone suffering with a physical illness, like for example diabetes, would obviously need professional support if they're going to get better - the same is true for mental illness.

Having conversations, as mentioned above, is something that you definitely can do as their friend. One of the other crucial things you can do to support a friend is signposting - i.e. directing friends to useful information and resources.

While in Cambridge, the main resources available for support will be:

College Nurse: Helen and Jo are qualified and keen to help students who are struggling

Disability Resource Centre:

University Counselling Service:

Student Union Advice Service:

Emergency resources:

- If you would like to speak to a medical professional, the [First Response Service](#) is available to everyone in Cambridgeshire who is experiencing a mental health crisis. Call 111 and select option 2 to get through.

Specifics

Emergencies

- If there is a life-threatening emergency, call 999
<https://www.nhs.uk/using-the-nhs/nhs-services/urgent-and-emergency-care/when-to-call-999/>
- If you feel you are in a mental health crisis, **call 111 and select option 2** to get through to the First Response Service, which provides 24/7 mental health advice in Cambridgeshire.
- If there is a mental health crisis outside of Cambridgeshire, see this website
<https://www.nhs.uk/using-the-nhs/nhs-services/mental-health-services/dealing-with-a-mental-health-crisis-or-emergency/>
- See this help for suicidal thoughts
www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Suicide/Pages/warning-signs.aspx
- College porters are trained in emergencies and will be on duty 24/7.
- If you only want someone to talk to, [Nightline](#) is available from 7pm-7am every day during Cambridge/Anglia Ruskin full term. You can talk anonymously and confidentially to student volunteers; they won't judge you or tell you what you should do, just give you an ear and some personal support.

Even if your friend does not want to seek help, if you feel it is a life-threatening emergency, get help, either via 999 services or the porters. If it is possible and safe, tell your friend you are doing so. They may be upset in the moment, but in the long-term it's better that you're on the safe side.

Harassment/bullying

Bullying is repeated behaviour which is intended to hurt someone either emotionally or physically. It is often aimed at certain people because of their race, religion, gender or sexual orientation or any other aspect such as appearance or disability. Harassment is specifically unwanted behaviour which you find offensive or which makes you feel intimidated or humiliated.

Resources

<https://www.citizensadvice.org.uk/law-and-courts/discrimination/what-are-the-different-types-of-discrimination/harassment/>

Sexual harassment/assault

Sexual harassment covers a range of behaviours, from sexualised comments that make a person uncomfortable, to repeatedly following a person. Sexual assault can

cover any sexual activity which occurs without consent, from kissing to sexual intercourse.

How to support your friend

- **Remind your friend that what happened was not their fault**, and only the perpetrator is to blame
- **Validate their perspective**. Assure your friend that you will believe them.
- **Validate their experience**. Remind them that there is no such thing as an assault which is not 'serious'.
- **Signposting** them towards support services, such as the college nurse, or the university Sexual Assault and Harassment Advisor
- **Encourage them to report** the incident, but don't make them feel guilty if they feel unable or don't want to

Resources

<https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/sexual-health/help-after-rape-and-sexual-assault/>

<https://www.thesurvivorstrust.org/>

<https://www.counselling.cam.ac.uk/sexual-assault-and-harassment-advisor>

<https://www.rainn.org/articles/tips-talking-survivors-sexual-assault>

Depression

Depression is a serious illness affecting mood.

Everyone has times of feeling low, but people with depression can feel a whole range of negative emotions - sadness, hopelessness, and in severe cases, suicidal feelings - for weeks or months on end.

Warning signs that your friend might have depression include:

- General low mood and negative emotions
- Losing interest in things they previously enjoyed
- Symptoms of anxiety
- Issues with sleeping patterns
- Self-harming behaviour - this includes not just physical harm such as cutting but also general self-jeopardising behaviours such as substance abuse, unhealthy eating patterns, excessive promiscuity, neglecting their basic hygiene etc.
- Unexplained tiredness or physical aches and pains

Supporting a friend with depression can be incredibly difficult - but the good news is that with the right treatment and support, they can make a full recovery.

How you can support a friend with depression:

- **Listen.** Just a willingness to listen makes people with depression feel less alone and isolated.
- **Signposting**, and supporting them in continuing treatment. This helps them in getting the support they need.
- **Keep in touch.** Just the sense of having a genuine friend who someone can talk to and spend time with can make a major difference, and will be genuinely appreciated.
- **Seek professional support if you need it.** Depression should be taken seriously as an illness, so definitely don't be afraid to meet with your College Nurse if you have concerns, and talk to a Porter or call the First Response Service (111 option 2) if you're worried about a friend's immediate safety.

What you shouldn't do:

- **Put yourself at risk.** Always put your basic welfare first. Being realistic about what you can cope with is best for both of you, as already mentioned under Boundaries. You can only support a friend if your own mental health is stable enough.
- **Say things like 'snap out of it'.** Depression is an illness, with biological causes. Thus, telling someone with depression to cheer up will not work, and could make them feel worse.
- **Think you can 'fix' someone's condition.** Again, depression is an illness and needs professional treatment.
- **Take things personally.** Always make sure your boundaries are respected, but if your friend is uncharacteristically rude to you, remember that they're ill, and are likely reflecting their own difficulties more than anything to do with you.

In general - always remember you're not a medical professional. What you can do is act as a friend who'll listen - which your friend will really appreciate.

All information from:

- <https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/clinical-depression/>
- <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/depression/about-depression/>
- <https://www.healthline.com/health/how-to-help-a-depressed-friend>
- <https://www.health.harvard.edu/mind-and-mood/what-causes-depression>

Suicidal thoughts

All info in this section is from

<https://www.rethink.org/advice-and-information/carers-hub/suicidal-thoughts-how-to-support-someone/>.

In some cases, people who are struggling with illnesses or certain situations can experience suicidal thoughts.

Warning signs to look out for:

- becoming anxious,
- being more irritable,
- being more confrontational,
- becoming quiet,
- having mood swings,
- acting recklessly,
- sleeping too much or too little,
- not wanting to be around other people,
- avoiding contact with friends and family,
- speaking very existentially or nihilistically
- having different problems with work or studies, or
- saying negative things about themselves.

In general, don't ignore your gut feeling - often you are the best judge of whether your friend has been noticeably changing their behaviour.

How can I support a friend with suicidal thoughts?

Some people worry that bringing this up to their friend could be dangerous - but actually, talking to people about their suicidal thoughts doesn't increase the risk of suicide occurring. If you are prepared to do it, then, asking a friend about any suicidal thoughts (if they're happy to talk - see Having conversations) can be a good way of supporting them.

You should not be afraid to seek help immediately if you are worried about your friend's safety. Porters are all trained for emergencies, and the First Response Service (111 option 2) provides mental health advice 24/7.

If you are worried about how you should interact with people who might be having suicidal thoughts, the following online resources are excellent and free:

- Charlie Waller training, aimed at staff but would be good to have a look at: <http://learning.cwmt.org.uk/>
- Stop suicide: <https://www.stopsuicidepledge.org/>
- Zero Suicide Alliance – includes free 20mins training: <http://www.zerosuicidealliance.com/training/>

Self-harm

All information in this section is directly from

<https://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/truth-about-self-harm>.

It can be incredibly distressing if a friend is self-harming - especially given the stereotypes that are sometimes attached to it. However there are certain myths about self-harm that should be avoided, such as:

- 'Self-harm is attention-seeking'
 - In fact many people who self-harm find it hard to talk to others about what they're going through.
- 'People who self-harm must enjoy it'
 - There's no evidence that people who self-harm feel pain any differently to anyone else.
- 'People who self-harm are suicidal'
 - This is not necessarily true. Plenty of people who self-harm do so as a coping mechanism for difficult feelings and situations.
 - However, people who self-harm may also be suicidal - hence it should be taken seriously.

If a friend is self-harming, key ways you can support them are:

- Letting them talk to you about it
- Signposting
- Seeking help if it's distressing for you

The online leaflet available via the link at the top provides further information about self-harm for anyone wishing to find out more.

Anxiety

Everyone feels anxious at times in their lives - and at university people will often experience fear about their academic success or worry about social situations. Feeling anxious occasionally is just part of being human.

However, if anxiety is having a significant effect on someone's everyday life, they might be suffering from a disorder that requires medical treatment.

In the UK, more than 1 in 10 of us will be experiencing an anxiety-related disorder at any point, but each experience is different.

There are many different conditions that have anxiety as a symptom, including Generalised Anxiety Disorder (GAD), panic disorder, phobias, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), obsessive-compulsive disorder, body-dysmorphic disorder (BDD), and social anxiety disorder.

As with other mental health conditions, the best things that you can do as a friend are

- A. **Be present** as a friend, and offer to **listen** if people want to express their feelings

- B. **Signpost** - let your friend know that help is available if they're unaware
- C. Try to avoid being judgemental or belittle their feelings - saying 'Don't be silly' or 'Everyone feels like this' often isn't helpful.

Behavioural signs that your friend might be experiencing anxiety include:

- Overthinking to the extent that they're unable to relax
- Difficulty concentrating
- Tiredness/low mood
- Feeling tense/fearful
- A sense of disconnection with reality

People experiencing anxiety might also display physical symptoms such as:

- Nausea
- Dizziness
- Extreme tiredness
- Sweating
- Restlessness
- Fast/heavy breathing
- Problems with sleeping
- In some cases, panic attacks

All information in this section is from:

<https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/anxiety-and-panic-attacks/anxiety-disorders/>

<https://mentalhealth-uk.org/help-and-information/conditions/anxiety-disorders/>

<https://youngminds.org.uk/find-help/conditions/anxiety/>

Panic attacks

Panic attacks can be very distressing to witness. They are essentially an exaggeration of a body's normal response to fear, danger, stress, or excitement. They are often caused or exacerbated by existing mental health conditions, substance abuse, and general daily stress.

Someone having a panic attack will experience physical symptoms such as high heartbeat, dizziness, nausea, sweating, shaking, or difficulty breathing, as well as the internal feeling that they are losing control and might faint, have a heart attack, or die. Because they are so sudden and intense, they can be very frightening to suffer.

If you are with a friend who is experiencing a panic attack, you should take the following steps:

- **Try and stay calm.** The symptoms of panic attacks come on very quickly, which makes it more frightening, but they're generally gone after 20 minutes,

with the symptoms generally peaking after 10 minutes. Furthermore, although they are frightening, panic attacks are not life-threatening.

- **Ask them to do grounding techniques.** This can include breathing exercises, listening exercises, holding onto something, or asking them to name five things that they can see.
- **Seek professional help if you need it.** In Cambridgeshire, you can contact medical professionals at any time by ringing up the [First Response Service via calling 111 Option 2.](#)

Information in this section from:

<https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/panic-attacks/symptoms-causes/syc-20376021>

<https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/anxiety-and-panic-attacks/panic-attacks/>

Eating disorders

Eating disorders are a group of mental illnesses surrounding food and weight loss, such as anorexia, bulimia, binge-eating disorder and orthorexia.

Warning signs

Weight loss is often a warning sign of an eating disorder, however, some people with eating disorders will not lose weight, and often behavioural symptoms are clear before physical ones.

- Saying that they have already eaten/ will eat later
- Not being truthful about eating
- Not being truthful about their weight
- Only eating certain (low-calorie) types of food
- Avoiding social eating
- Hiding food
- Excessive exercising
- Wearing baggy clothes
- Complaining of feeling cold
- Talking about food or weight an unusual amount
- Ritualistic behaviours around food and meal times
- Eating very slowly or very quickly
- Seeming unusually tired or low on energy
- Irritability/anger

What not to say

- Avoid complimenting weight loss

- Be aware that justifications such as 'but you already look fine' may not help, as often eating disorders are more about control than perfectionism.
- 'You look healthy' can also be interpreted as a comment on weight. It is best to avoid giving compliments based on appearance; compliments about other things can make your friend feel more valued
- Avoid discussing weight, food and exercise where possible

What to say

- Encourage them to talk to a professional, such as a GP or a college nurse, and to seek treatment
- Acknowledge that they are not to blame
- Recognise how distressing the illness must be for them

<https://www.beateatingdisorders.org.uk/supporting-someone/supporting-somebody>

General health resources

GP, college nurse; Addenbrooke's Hospital

General help: www.studentadvice.cam.ac.uk/welfare/generalhealth

NHS 111 (out of hours GP; option 2 is 24hrs mental health crisis support)

NHS Self-help advice: www.nhs24.com/selfhelpguide/atoz/

NHS 'Student Health':

www.nhs.uk/livewell/studenthealth/Pages/Studenthealthhome.aspx

Work stress

Cambridge can be a very stressful environment, and it is normal to have periods where you have a lot of work to do. However, stress beyond a certain level is not healthy, and steps can be taken to help.

Warning signs that stress is becoming a problem for a friend

- They are always working and doesn't seem to take breaks
- Even when not working, they are stressed out about work
- They begin to withdraw from normal activities

Steps you can take

- Encourage them to take regular breaks, and have activities planned for these breaks, even if it's just a trip to the shops
- Don't downplay their stress, but remind them to keep their academic work in perspective
- Remind them to keep looking after themselves- eating regular meals and sleeping for 8 hours
- Continue to invite them to social events, even if they often say no
- Encourage them to talk to their Director of Studies if they are really struggling
- Signpost them to resources on managing stress

www.studentminds.org.uk/exam-stress.html

UCS self-help (based on workshops):

Concentration: www.counselling.cam.ac.uk/selfhelp/selfleafpdf/concent/view o

Procrastination: www.counselling.cam.ac.uk/selfhelp/selfleafpdf/procras/view o

Coping with Exams: www.counselling.cam.ac.uk/selfhelp/selfleafpdf/copexam/view

Bereavement

Grief affects different people very differently, and there is no right or wrong way to feel. Some common experiences include:

- Sadness or depression
- Shock or disbelief
- Numbness or denial
- Anger
- Panic and confusion
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Problems with sleep
- Problems with appetite
- Withdrawal

There is no clear guide on how to talk to someone experiencing bereavement, but here are some pointers:

- Listen to what they have to say
- Encourage them to talk if they want to
- Create an environment in which they can be themselves, without having to hide their feelings
- Be aware that grief can take a long time to process

<https://www.cruse.org.uk/get-help/about-grief/how-to-help-someone-bereaved>

<https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/guides-to-support-and-services/bereavement/support-and-self-care/>

Alcohol/drugs

It can seem that alcohol and drugs are just a part of university, however, this can lead to problems of reliance and addiction.

Warning signs

- Drinking for reasons such as to relieve stress, or feel 'normal'
- Drinking alone
- Choosing drinking over other responsibilities
- Becoming isolated and distant from friends
- Becoming irritable

How to support your friend

- **Speak without judgement**, assuring your friend you know it is not their fault, and you do not think they are weak
- **Avoid drinking alcohol/taking drugs** around them, even in social situations. Look for social situations that are not centred around alcohol
- **Signposting** them towards support, such as the college nurse, or the University Counselling Service, or a GP.

<https://www.counselling.cam.ac.uk/selfhelp/newselhe/aladd>