

How to Reach Out to Show Support

Do you suspect someone is struggling with their mental health? It can be difficult to start a conversation about mental health. It's a sensitive subject and can be natural for someone to get a bit defensive or be caught off guard. You don't need to be a mental health expert to help someone in distress. Ask how the person is doing. And be specific about what you've noticed that is concerning you. Here's some gentle ways to start a conversation about it that show you're reaching out from a place of love:

- "It seems like you've been losing weight and becoming more withdrawn. Is everything OK? Do you want to talk?"
- "I notice you've been down lately and haven't seemed like yourself – I wanted to check in properly and see how you're getting along."
- "I've been learning more about depression and noticed a couple 'warning signs' that apply with you. I just thought I'd check in to see if you're okay? I may be wrong, but I care about you so much and didn't want to brush over it."
- "Hey, I noticed the other day you were talking a bit more bleakly about the future/the things in your life. It didn't feel appropriate to bring it up in a group setting but thought I'd reach out now to talk more about it. From my own personal experience, I know I feel better opening up about things and I'd like to help in any way I can."
- "You appear to be okay but I know you've had a lot to cope with – I just thought I'd check in to have a deeper conversation to make sure you haven't been suffering in silence."
- "I was sorry to hear you've been going through a tough time lately – I care about you a lot and want to make sure you're not alone during this period. Want me to bring some dinner over this week and talk more about things?"

Even if they don't want to talk, knowing that you care can help her to feel less alone.

If you have struggled with feelings that they might identify with – such as feeling hopeless or worried all the time – you could tell them how you've felt, and how you coped with these feelings in the past.

Be compassionate. A comment like "Just relax" or "You'll get over it" can come across as judgmental. Instead, just show your loved one you're there to offer support. Suggest connecting virtually over coffee, if this is the kind of thing you normally do together, or ask them what they would like to do instead. Try to find a relaxed time when you know you won't be interrupted. Have the kinds of conversations you usually have with them. People don't want to feel judged for understandable signs of distress. Nor do they want to be defined by a mental health problem if this is what they are experiencing.

The kind of help people need depend on the type and severity of their problem. For example:

Level 1

I'm worried about you

- You are concerned about how anxious and withdrawn they are. The fact that they're barely sleeping and missing meals only makes the problem worse.

"I'm worried about you. Have you thought of what kinds of supports might help right now?" If your loved one does suggest that their distress might be mental health related, you could ask them if they have a doctor, or a community or spiritual advisor they could speak to, or a counselling service.

If they don't believe there's a problem, then don't argue with them about it. And don't try to suggest possible solutions. Just keep checking in to see how they're doing, or get together more often, if that's what they want.

Level 2

You need help now

- They describes feeling hopeless, and the next time you see them they arrive at looking dishevelled and distracted.

"I really don't think this issue can wait. Do you have a doctor or someone else you can call?"

Even if your loved one doesn't want or feel the need to get help, stay supportive. Offer to go to an appointment with them, and ask them if you or someone else they feel comfortable with could connect with them in the next couple of days to see how they're doing.

Level 3

It's an emergency

- They're talking about killing herself, and describing ways she could do it.

"Will you let me take you to a nearby emergency department or is there someone else close to you who can accompany you?"

If they refuse help, and won't let you or someone else accompany them to seek professional help, call 911 to ensure their safety. It is important that they not be left alone. If they are not willing to stay in the company of another person, call 911 to assure immediate help.