

# Learn more about mental health for youth

## Supporting a friend

*How can you support a friend who might have a mental health challenge?*

*What are some signs that they might need support?*

*Where can you look for extra sources of support?*

*What are some things you can do so you don't get overwhelmed?*

As a young person, it can be hard to find useful answers to these questions. This resource has been developed by youth for youth, to offer some answers that might work for you. If you are interested in learning more, keep reading!

## What can mental health challenges look like?

For most of us, there are times when we might feel “off”—for example, sad, worried, guilty, scared or suspicious. These emotions can happen to anyone at times. But these kinds of feelings can become a problem if they last a long time or get in the way of our daily lives.

Mental health challenges can affect anyone. They may change how we feel, think and act. They may affect our physical wellbeing too. These signs may be visible to other people (like changes in behaviour) or invisible (like thoughts and feelings).

Mental health can look different from one person to another—so it's important to have a conversation with someone to understand what they may be experiencing.

Here are some of the changes that might affect a person who is having a mental health challenge:

### How someone might be **FEELING**

- Feeling very sad or irritable (cranky)
- Having worries, fears and anxieties that get in the way of daily activities
- Having extreme mood swings—from feeling really great to feeling really low
- Feeling numb or losing interest in things
- Feeling hopeless or pessimistic, or crying a lot
- Feeling really angry

### How someone might be **THINKING**

- Having confused thoughts
- Finding it hard to concentrate, which affects work or school
- Making poor decisions
- Having strange beliefs that are not based in reality (delusions), or hearing or seeing things that aren't there (hallucinations)
- Thinking about killing or harming themselves

### What someone might be **DOING**

- Sleeping or eating either more or less than usual
- Avoiding school or work, or activities they previously enjoyed
- Drinking or using other drugs excessively
- Talking about killing or harming themselves

### How it might **APPEAR TO OTHERS**

- Seeming restless or not “put together”
- Having physical challenges, like headaches and stomach aches, with no clear cause
- Keeping to themselves more than usual
- Seeming annoyed, restless or withdrawn
- For some people, you may not notice any major changes in their mood or behaviour

## How can I support others?

There are three important parts to supporting a friend with a mental health challenge:

1. Reach out.
2. Be supportive.
3. Get help from others.

### 1. Reach out

If you notice that a friend might need support, a first step may be reaching out to them to start a conversation. If you feel comfortable, connect with your friend to ask how they are doing.

Try to be specific about what you've noticed that is making you concerned.

#### You could say

**You seem distant lately. How are you doing?  
Is there anything I can do to help?**

**It looked like you were having some trouble  
yesterday. Is there something going on? Do you  
want to talk about it?**

Even if your friend doesn't want to talk, knowing that you care can help them feel less alone.

### 2. Be supportive

If your friend shares what is happening for them, you can validate their experience by showing you understand how difficult things may be for them.

You could say

**I'm sorry, that really sucks.  
Do you want to talk about it?**

**That sounds like a lot to deal with.**

Try to avoid comments that might sound as though you think that your friend can control how they think or feel, or that their experience isn't such a big deal.

#### Don't say

*"Everyone feels this way sometimes."*

*"I've felt like this before—you'll get over it soon enough."*

### Important

Only reach out in this way if you feel comfortable doing this.

It's important not to feel that you're alone in supporting your friend. Try to find someone, like a trusted family member or teacher, who can back you up as you try to help your friend.

For example, you might want to bounce ideas off this person about whether you're doing or saying the right thing. Or, if you are not comfortable speaking to your friend directly, you could ask this person to help you figure out what to do or who else to involve.

It may also be helpful to talk to someone who can support you, especially if your conversation with your friend leaves you with uneasy feelings.

If you have had a similar experience that you are comfortable sharing, it might help your friend to feel less alone. You may also be able to share healthy ways that you have coped with these challenges, and positive strategies that have worked for you.

**If you can, continue to be there for your friend** and spend time together like you normally would. Try to keep most of your conversations on topics that you usually talk about, and not always about their mental health.

Your friend is still the same person you knew before—people don't want to be defined by their mental health challenges.

After your friend has shared their experience, you can tell them that you are glad they told you about it, and offer to keep the conversation going.

**You could say**

**I'm glad you talked to me. Do you want to meet tomorrow? We can just hang out or we can talk more—or maybe there's some other way I can help.**

**Thanks for telling me this has been going on. If you ever want to talk more, let me know.**

### 3. Get help from others

The kind of help that your friend may need will depend on how they are feeling, and what types of support they are comfortable receiving.

#### **IF YOU THINK YOUR FRIEND COULD USE MORE SUPPORT**

It is usually a good idea to suggest that your friend also talk to someone else about their concerns. (It is good for your friend, and good for you too—it means you're not the only person who is looking out for them.) See the sidebar to the right for a list of people they could speak with. If your friend is uncomfortable reaching out like this, you can offer to be there with them or connect with someone else for them.

Start by showing your friend that you care about them.

**You could say**

**It sounds like things might be getting more serious for you lately. I'm worried about you.**

**I haven't seen you a lot lately. I'm worried that something is going on.**

#### **Important**

Remember that different strategies work for different people. So, if you share your own experiences and how you coped, don't pressure your friend to do the same things.

It's more important to just listen, and to encourage the person to find coping strategies they are comfortable with.

#### **Important**

You don't have to do this alone.

Other people that your friend could get help from might include:

- a family member
- an adult you trust
- a teacher
- a doctor
- a school wellness service or other

Then you may suggest some possible sources of help

**Have you talked to anyone else about getting some help? / Do you want to talk to someone for more support?**

**Maybe you could reach out to \_\_\_\_\_ again? / Or try speaking with \_\_\_\_\_? (Use the list of support people in the sidebar on p.3, or mention someone you know they're close to.) Do any of those options seem doable for you?**

Maybe this isn't an option your friend is ready for now, but opening this conversation can show that you are there if they want to talk more.

If the person's challenges continue, remind them that you are there for them. In this situation, you should definitely reach out to someone who can help you figure out what to do next or can reach out to your friend directly.

If your friend's behaviours start to become more alarming, they may need more immediate support. Examples might be big changes in their mood, a major change in their regular activities, increased use of alcohol or other drugs or talking about suicide or self-harm.

### **IF YOU THINK THIS IS AN EMERGENCY FOR YOUR FRIEND**

If your friend is talking about self-harm or suicide, and is describing ways to do it, they need help now. You may be able to get your friend to a source of help if they agree to go with you, and if you are comfortable doing this. Even if they don't agree, it is still important to respond with their safety in mind.

#### **You could say**

**I'm really worried about your safety right now. I think we should go to the emergency department.**

**Can we call someone to let them know what is happening, like a family member? Maybe they can come with us—or maybe you'd prefer that they go to the hospital with you instead?**

If your friend doesn't want you to call anyone and is unwilling or unable to go to the emergency department, you can offer to call 911 with them. If you are concerned about their safety and they refuse any help from you or someone else, **you should call 911.**

### **Important**

It can be difficult to have these types of conversations with your friends. If you are in any situation where you are supporting a friend, you should reach out to other people to help as well.

When helping a friend through a difficult time, you might experience upsetting emotions yourself.

*Remember to seek out support if you need it too.*