

Supporting a Friend

Friends everywhere help and support each other. Family, friends, and neighbors have relationships and social and cultural strengths that paid professionals cannot match. Often a friend or relative is the only person who can help. Research shows that when people use the power of social relationships to work on problems together, they can solve the very toughest challenges.

Yet tough challenges are never easy, even when friends want the best for each other. Certainly it is normal for people to worry about what to do when a friend must face a difficult challenge or is experiencing difficult emotions. It is normal to become anxious about stepping in or stepping up.

We seldom talk about how to help or comfort the people we are closest to. Nobody teaches this. When someone is distraught, we might even feel ashamed we cannot help. We avoid pitching in. We look for rescue for ourselves, or we throw the ball to experts, even when it involves someone we love or a person we have known for years. We are capable of making all kinds of excuses to cover up our own uncertainty. We might say we do not want to make things worse.

As this human frailty builds up, people with problems become isolated. Our culture does not do a great job helping people talk about and work through their feelings. Everyone misses opportunities to pitch in and help.

Not to worry. Every culture on earth, and every religious tradition, supports helping people who are sick or in trouble. Everyone can learn simple ways to be supportive. This single page is just enough to start.

Review other material that seems relevant, at a minimum do an internet check about crisis and suicide, and identify someone you can call if you need backup. Beyond that, it is just a matter of resolve. Commit to helping your friend.

Here is one technique that screens for trouble and supports planning. It is a simple script, just four questions. This may seem artificial at first, but with five minutes of practice, you can follow the pattern using your own words. Remember, you want this to be supportive and voluntary. It is okay for this to feel awkward. Remember, you may be the only person in a position to offer support or head off trouble.

The goal of the script is to set a positive tone, support a person's engagement in a process of recovery, and screen for isolation and tunnel-vision thinking.

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To get the best effect, find a quiet area. It is good to have others nearby, but out of earshot. Sit close enough to feel present with each other. Ask the questions one at a time, and wait for the person to answer.

Listen to the answers. Do not rush. People benefit when they say what they are dealing with, and benefit even more when they know they have been heard.

Ask these questions, in order.

1. What have you accomplished since the last time we met? At a minimum, we both managed to show up for today's conversation.

2. What are you facing? Let people identify their own challenges. Do not suggest answers. You can follow up by asking: "Why is that important?" Do not interrupt. Let the person finish.

3. Who are your allies? Chances are that people already have someone helping them. If someone is all alone and has no allies, say that you will continue to check in with them and support them as much as you can.

4. What is your plan? Let the person say what he plans to do. Do not jump in or interrupt. This is his plan, not yours. The minimum plan is to check in again at some future time.

Expect to experience some anxiety and unsettledness as you and your friend work through this script. That is normal. Life is a whole-body experience, and always connects with emotions.

Churches, schools, and community groups can incorporate this script into social gatherings or working sessions. You can use the questions as an icebreaker. Have people work in small groups of three or four.

These four questions apply to all sorts of challenges. There is no need to impose labels.

The questions help build a sense of community and support.

Do not make this script the whole point of your gathering. It is just there to help people stay safe and make progress.

However, if you have a strong reaction or fear about the person's safety, take action. You may be the only person able to help your friend. If there are any warning signs of suicide, ask about suicide directly. Say, "Are you thinking about killing yourself?" Stay with your friend if possible. Call your backup person. Take the next step for safety.