

For students: When you're concerned about a friend

It can be a difficult situation when someone is having difficulties and you may be uncertain how to help them, uncertain whether they want your help, or uncertain how to get them to someone who can offer additional help. Your encouragement and concern could make a difference. You can definitely tell a friend that you are concerned and that you want to help.

Helping a Friend

Helping another person involves listening, understanding, caring and planning together. The following are some guidelines that you might consider as you assume a helping role.

First Step

The key to all helping is listening, which may be more difficult than it might appear. Listening means focusing our attention on the thoughts, words and feelings of another person. Listening involves considering another person's concerns *from his or her point of view*. We aren't listening well if we are busy trying to think of what to say in return or if we are thinking about our own problems. Often we are tempted to give advice and solutions. Indeed our advice is given with the sincere desire to help the person feel better. Yet much advice is useless or unhelpful, especially when it is given before the other person has had the opportunity to talk about the problem and to express her or his feelings fully.

Listening may seem passive, like we are not doing anything. However, *effective* listening requires that we communicate our attentiveness to the person who is speaking. That might involve looking at the person directly, asking them to clarify things you don't understand, touching them physically in a reassuring way, trying to summarize what they are saying to be sure you and they know that you understand, or asking questions to help them take a closer look at what they are saying. If you find the person rejecting what you have to say, or arguing with you, you may want to ask yourself if you are listening carefully. You may have slipped over into an advice-giving mode or you may have begun to talk about your own or other people's problems rather than the ones your friend is presenting.

Second Step

The second most important part of helping is the *creation of an atmosphere in which the other person can express feelings of sadness, frustration, anger or despair*. Often, we are tempted to cut off feelings by making reassuring statements that everything will be all right. As we experience the discomfort of someone we care about, our first reaction is often to do or say something that might help him or her feel better. If we move too quickly to do this, though, the people will feel that they haven't completely expressed their feelings. They may even feel like their feelings should be held back because the feelings are too "bad." *Before people can begin to deal with their feelings fully, they need to be able to express them fully*. Questions like, "How did you feel about what happened?" can help people get in touch with their feelings about the situation. Often you will find that people have a variety of feelings, some of which seem conflicting to the person. Just sitting with someone while they express their various feelings about what is going on can be very helpful. Your understanding and supportive *presence* while

they are trying to sort out their various thoughts and feelings is often more important and effective than any advice you may give to try to solve the problem.

Third Step

The third important aspect of helping is the *generation of alternatives and options and the careful consideration of each of the alternatives and options*. While it may not seem so to the person in distress, there are usually several possible options in any problem situation. Some of the options may be ones the person doesn't want to think about and some may be options that have never occurred to her or him. For example, the person who has failed an exam has several options: to get tutoring in the course material, to develop new study habits, to rearrange schedules to create more study time, to talk with the professor, to change majors, or to drop out of school. Some of these may, of course, be unrealistic options if they clash with other goals and objectives, but even initially unrealistic options might become desirable as the person evaluates his or her position more objectively.

Final Step

The final step is to *determine a specific plan of action*. Although we, as friends, can be helpful in defining the alternatives and clarifying the consequences of each option, the final decision needs to remain with the other person. At times it is tempting to encourage a particular solution that makes sense to us. It is important that the person make a plan of action that makes sense to *them* because, unless the person can commit him- or herself to a specific plan of action, nothing is likely to happen and the problem will remain unresolved.

Other Things to Consider

It is not always necessary that you need to go through all four steps with your friends in order to help them. Often you only need to be a good listener. What they may need at the time is not a specific solution to a particular problem, but just a chance to express what they are feeling and someone to listen to them.

We also need to be aware that a person may not always feel "better" after having talked with us. They may still feel bad about their situation or their loss. This is especially true if they have lost a significant and meaningful relationship. They may need to grieve that loss over a period of days, weeks or months. We can be helpful by accepting and communicating our awareness of the appropriateness of the grieving. Our support, acceptance and understanding over a period of time can be helpful to our friend to move on to other meaningful relationships and/or resume a more normal, active life.

Friends who we just can't seem to help.

You may find yourself in the helping role with a friend who cannot define specific concerns, who cannot take the initiative to carry out any defined options, who constantly comes to you to talk about the same problem, or who continues to be upset without taking steps to resolve the problem. In such cases, you may want to suggest that the person seek professional counseling. You might say something like: "We have been talking about this same problem for weeks and nothing seems to be changing for you. I know this has been a difficult time for you but I just don't know what to do to help you and I think you need to talk with someone who is trained to help people with their problems." If they are on a college campus, you might suggest they go to their counseling or mental health center. Most communities also have local mental health personnel available in public agencies or in private practice. If your friend resists seeking help,

you may want to consult with some of these practitioners to get assistance with your own feelings about dealing with your friend under these stressful conditions.

UIC Counseling Center Services:

If your friend is a UIC student, it may help you to know the details of what is available at UIC:

The UIC Counseling Center services are available to all enrolled UIC students at no additional costs. Counseling is confidential as protected by law and is not noted on students' academic record. If you want, you also could tell your friend you contacted us to consult about how to help them and/or let your friend know that it would be OK to contact us directly by calling the **Counseling Center** at **312.996.3490** or stopping by our office at the Student Services Building (**SSB 2010**) Monday through Friday 8:30 a.m. – 5:00 p.m. In addition, you could offer them the number to our **InTouch Hotline (312.996.5535)** to talk with our trained volunteers any evening between 6:00 p.m. – 10:30 p.m. You are also free to accompany your friend, or come in by yourself to discuss the situation with your friend.

At the Counseling Center, we meet each week with 15 to 30 new students who are reaching out for help and for most it is an important first step to becoming better able to handle their problems, whatever they may be. So we'd hope your friend can do so either here with us or with another place to get help, such as family, clergy, physician, teachers, a coach, or campus housing staff if they are living in a residence hall.

For additional hints and information about helping a friend or other topics regarding student mental health and well-being, consider visiting the [ULifeline link](#) at the UIC Counseling Center website.