

Helping a Friend or Loved One: When to Listen, When to Suggest Professional Help

Have you ever been listening intently to a friend talk about a problem, when suddenly, you become worried? Perhaps it's the content of what has been said, or the way in which it is said, but an alarm has gone off inside your head, signaling a problem. When we hear something that seems too hard for a friend to manage, it can feel overwhelming.

When do we suggest to a friend, or realize ourselves that we need, the help of a professional?

Impact on functioning

One way to think about the issue is to ask the question, "How is this problem affecting the ability to function?" Is the problem interfering with relationships, health, parenting, or work? What is the actual impact of the problem? When the impact of a problem is noticeably changing how someone is functioning, it may be time to encourage professional help.

Signs that may suggest professional support is a good idea include:

- Feeling unable to work, parent, or keep up a home
- Feeling unable to handle stress with normal coping strategies
- Decreased appetite with significant weight loss
- Increased use of drugs or alcohol
- Increase in risk-taking behaviors, including gambling and sex
- Feeling unable to focus or get anything done
- Having a sense of inappropriate guilt and unworthiness
- Inability to fall asleep or to stay asleep, or awakening too early
- Feeling like sleeping all the time, despite potential consequences
- Feeling very angry and engaging in violent fantasies
- Experiencing panic attacks
- Feeling fearful of being around others, even children or family
- Feeling suspicious of people who are normally trusted, especially when normally trusted friends are providing feedback that seems overly suspicious
- Taking no enjoyment or satisfaction in activities that are normally enjoyed
- Feeling agitated or restless
- Thoughts of suicide or homicide (*Always take these thoughts or statements seriously. Call a professional for help if someone is expressing thoughts to harm herself or others.*)

If a friend is having any of the above signs, it may be a good time to tell your friend you are worried and want to help.

Ways you can help

In addition to suggesting professional help, such as a licensed therapist, you can also take action yourself. You might suggest ways you could help your friend so he may seek help.

You can leave the advice to the professionals, and still actively support a friend facing difficulties. Here are some ideas of what to offer a friend experiencing a tough time:

- Offer child care if it is needed, so that a friend can attend counseling appointments.
- Offer to call clergy if a friend might benefit from spiritual support.
- Offer to make a meal or pick up groceries.
- Offer to call a friend's workplace. Perhaps help with paperwork if a friend needs a leave from work.
- Call and check in daily while distress continues.
- Offer to go for a walk.
- Connect a friend with a support network that may help; for instance, a depression support group or a grief support group.

Being a friend to someone needing support is a unique chance to grow as a person, and to foster trust and closeness. Trust your worried feelings and take action if you notice signs that indicate professional help is in order.

*Source - Beacon Health Options