



# caring for each other out loud

## A GUIDE FOR CONVERSATIONS WITH FRIENDS

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### HOW TO APPROACH A FRIEND YOU'RE WORRIED ABOUT

If you've recently noticed some signs that your friend might be struggling emotionally, you may be wondering why they haven't brought up their struggles with you directly. After all, you want to be there for your friend and help them through whatever they might be dealing with.

Remember that there are a lot of different reasons why a friend might not be up front with you about what they're going through. They may not know how to talk about how they're feeling or what they've experienced. They may not want to be a burden or worry others. They may come from a culture or a family where difficult feelings are not openly discussed. They may want to reach out for help but feel embarrassed or ashamed that they can't cope on their own.

As a friend, one way you can offer support is by starting the conversation about your concerns instead of waiting for them to confide in you.

### CONVERSATION TIPS

#### **Ask them to get together or check in with you.**

You could start with something like, "You don't seem like yourself lately. Maybe it's just everything going on right now, but I wanted to check in and see if we could sit down and catch up." Or, "Hey, I miss you. I feel like we haven't had a chance to hang out or talk like we normally do. When can we catch up?"

#### **Meet up in person, or schedule a phone call or video chat.**

These methods of communication are preferable to just texting or messaging because you can get a better sense of nonverbal cues, like how they look and how they react to what you say. It's easy to say, "I'm fine" via text.

#### **Choose a location that is conducive to having a talk in relative privacy.**

You could offer to grab coffee, hang out at one your rooms, or go for a walk. A loud, crowded space is not the right venue for a deeper conversation.

#### **Start the conversation from a place of concern and support.**

For example, you could say something like, "You seem a little down lately and I just wanted you to know that I'm here for you." Be sure to be able to give them your full attention from the outset.

#### **Be patient.**

They may not be ready to tell you everything, or they may not know how to articulate what they're going through. Be comfortable with silence if they need to take their time. But you can circle back around to your concerns if you continue to notice things that worry you.

## MORE CONVERSATION TIPS

### **Be specific about what you've seen or heard that's causing you concern.**

For example, you can say things like, "It concerned me when you said..." or "I am worried about you because I have noticed that you seem – low energy, sad, angry, depressed – the last few times we've talked." Being clear about what you're noticing and making it clear that you are sharing your perception, which may or may not be in alignment with their reality, is helpful for your friend and makes it easier to follow up on their behavior over time.

### **Really listen to them.**

Listen to details of their story, but also listen for the specific emotions they are sharing. The various events, exchanges and people that are involved in stressful situations matter, but what's most significant is their emotional reaction to the details. It might be impossible to change the situation, but it can be possible to bear witness, validate, or even soothe their emotions. So listening to how they feel is as important as listening to the specific events that drive their feelings.

### **Let them know they are not alone.**

Sometimes when we're struggling, we isolate ourselves or feel like no one understands what we're going through. It's important for your friend to know they have a support system to lean on. This can be as simple a periodic but regular text or DM check-ins. What is most important is that your actions follow your words – do not say you care and want to be there for them and then disappear for long periods of time.

## THINGS TO AVOID

### **No conversation is perfect, but try to avoid:**

- Language that feels judgmental or accusatory.
- Bringing other people's opinions into the conversation (e.g., "everyone has noticed that...", "a bunch of us think...").
- Being combative or defensive, interrupting them while they're speaking, or minimizing their concerns.
- Bringing a bunch of other people with you when you meet up. You don't want your friend to feel like you're ganging up on them.
- Diagnosing the problem or trying to fix it for them. It's not on you to know all the answers or give them advice on how to handle their situation. If they are struggling with an issue like depression, addiction, or grief, they may need a different kind of support than you can offer as a friend.

## YOU'VE STARTED THE CONVERSATION. WHAT'S NEXT?

Starting the conversation with a friend who's struggling is the first step. If your friend is receptive, you may suggest that they seek therapy or get connected to support groups or other resources. If your friend is open to the idea, you can support them as they reach out for help. If your friend doesn't know where to start looking for help, they can start by texting START to 741741 or calling 988 for a free, confidential chat with a trained counselor anytime.

If your friend shuts down the conversation, brushes off your concerns, or tells you everything is fine but you still think something is wrong, it's important to trust your instincts. If you're stuck on what to do next, reach out to someone who can help, like a mentor in your life, a faculty or staff member, or a help line for advice.



### **Content adapted from the JED Foundation**

Check out [jedfoundation.org](http://jedfoundation.org) for more information about caring for your friends, including articles on what to do if you think someone is self-injuring, what to do when you're worried about a friend who doesn't want help, how to take care of yourself when you're taking care of your friends, and much more.