

Tips on 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. Even when our advice is given with the sincere desire to help the person feel better, advice can be 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.

Remember to avoid being judgmental about your friend's situation.

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, people may 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 problematic 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 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 or just to get another perspective about how to handle the situation.

Sometimes hearing about someone else's struggles can be difficult and can leave you feeling emotionally drained. Your well-being is just as important as your friend's. Recognize the limits of your own power and responsibility:

You do not have the power to make your friend change or control how your friend will respond to you

You do have the power to be genuine, caring, concerned, how you express yourself, how much you can extend yourself, and maintaining healthy boundaries. Be aware of your own needs and, when needed, your support for yourself. Be a good role model in your community.

If you have concerns about your friend, in a supportive and gentle but direct way, share what you have observed and what your concerns are.

WHEN A FRIEND IS IN CRISIS

A crisis situation in which a person's usual coping style is no longer working. As emotions intensify, coping becomes less effective, until the person may become disoriented, non-functional, or attempt harm. If your friend is in a crisis, you might see or hear the following warning signs:

- Suicidal statement or attempts
- Homicidal threats (written or verbal) or attempts
- Destruction of property or other criminal acts
- Extreme panic reactions
- Inability to communicate (e.g. garbled or slurred speech, disjointed thoughts)
- Loss of contact with reality (e.g. seeing or hearing things that aren't there, expressing beliefs or actions at odds with reality)
- Highly disruptive behavior (e.g. hostility, aggression, violence)
- Dealing with a traumatic event

If you believe your friend is in crisis or imminent danger of harm to your friend or another person, immediately call Public Safety at 619-260-7777 or x2222 on-campus. You can also call the Counseling Center for a consultation on a situation at 619-260-4655. The Counseling Center's hours are M-F 8:30 am-5 pm and Wednesday, until 6 pm. After regular office hours, contact Public Safety and ask for the on-call counselor. The Counseling Center also has walk-in hours M-F 11 am-3 pm.

Note: This document is based on an audio tape script developed by the Counseling Center at the University of Texas, Austin. With their permission, it was revised and edited into its current form by the staff of the University of Florida's Counseling Center. Some information in this document was also borrowed from Hobart and William Smith Colleges' Counseling Center.