

Take Charge in Changing Times

Encouraging a Friend to Seek Professional Help

Friends, family and neighbors can provide a wonderful support network when someone is facing tough times. But sometimes caring isn't enough. A person may need professional help to solve the problem.

Tom and Alice have struggled for several years to make ends meet in their small main street business. But even when times were tough, Tom's sense of humor and optimism always came through. Business was especially bad this year, and Tom and Alice have had some major medical expenses as well. Several people have noticed that Alice has been alone at more and more community events. When people do see Tom, he seems tired and distracted, without a smile. Alice has admitted to Mark, Tom's best friend, that she's really worried about Tom. Mark has stopped in to have coffee with Tom several times. But Tom won't talk about problems except to say he feels like giving up. In fact, he hardly wants to talk at all.

Even when you know a person could use some professional help, it's hard to make it happen.

You may worry that it's not really your business, you may be uncomfortable talking about something so personal, or you may be afraid that the friend or family member will be angry with you.

Your friend may be embarrassed about the situation and feel that a self-reliant person ought to solve problems without troubling others. The person may not realize how much a loss or problem is affecting his or her behavior. A depressed person may feel hopeless about the situation and lose the initiative to take action.

Loss, grief, or depression can immobilize a person, making it hard for the individual to look realistically at a situation or to take action. It's important for friends or family members not to ignore signs that the person needs help.

These steps can help you encourage a friend or family member to seek help.

Plan a caring confrontation.

Find a time when neither of you will be rushed or distracted and a place where your friend's privacy is protected. Think about how you will start your conversation. Use phrases such as "I've been really worried about. ... " or "I'm bringing this up because I really care about you ... "

Discuss specific behavior.

Focus on those things that seem uncharacteristic of your friend, or on changes you have noticed. Be sensitive as you talk about your concerns. Keep your voice caring and non-accusing. It's hard for people to admit that others have noticed changes they thought they were hiding.

Give your friend time to talk about what he or she feels.

Stress and emotional pain can make it difficult for your friend to respond to your concern. The person may feel that he or she has to reassure you that everything is OK. It's also possible that you have not interpreted the situation accurately. Ask your friend to tell you how he or she feels about the concerns you've brought up. Listen for the words and the feelings in any responses your friend might make. Be attentive and supportive even if you disagree with your friend's interpretation of the situation. Tell your friend what you are hearing and check to make sure you understand each other.

Talk with your friend about available sources of help.

Be aware of the resources available in your community. Information and help lines such as the Iowa Concern Hotline can help you locate phone numbers for your Community Mental Health Center, clinics or hospitals, and other helping resources.

Before you approach your friend about seeking help, try to understand some of the barriers that might prevent him or her from taking that action.

Many people believe that counselors or mental health professionals are only for people with mental illness. They are afraid of labels and may not contact a counselor because they do

not believe they fit the stereotype of a person who needs help. They may not realize that counselors can help people work through difficult problems in a trusting, nonjudgmental, confidential atmosphere.

If the problem is financial, the person may worry about the cost of professional help. Find out about sliding fees and other forms of assistance before you talk with your friend.

Another barrier may be fear of change. Perhaps the person already knows the alternatives and fears having to reach a decision.

Finally, your friend may feel that accepting help is a final sign of weakness and failure. You cannot deny these feelings, but you can give your friend accurate information and reassurance that you understand his or her hesitancy to seek help.

Offer to help make the contacts.

You might ask, "Does it make sense to you to contact _____?" or "How do you feel about making an appointment with _____?" If your friend is willing, you can help to find the phone number and make the call. You also can let the person know that you are willing to make the call after he or she has had a chance to think it over. Waiting to make the calls is not an option if your friend shows signs of suicidal behavior or is severely depressed. For help in recognizing those signs, see the information that follows.

Continue to be supportive.

A person who is suffering the effects of loss or depression may not respond immediately to your concern. An important first step is letting the person know that someone cares and that there are alternatives he or she can consider. Follow through with continued contacts.

Sadness or depression?

Everyone experiences feelings of sadness at times. People may say they "have the blues," are "down in the dumps," or "feel depressed." However, someone who is sad does not necessarily suffer from depression. Depression is a serious illness, with a number of specific symptoms. It is important

to know that there are many different types of treatment available for a person with depression. Someone with depression cannot "just cheer up" or "snap out of it."

Feelings of sadness and grief are normal and natural responses to loss. In the grieving period following a crisis or loss, several of the symptoms of depression may occur. When symptoms of depression persist or cause disruption in a person's life, getting professional help is extremely important. If you notice several of the following signs persisting, or if any symptom is interfering with a person's ordinary functioning, you should ask for help from a mental health professional. Often the person with depression is immobilized and will not be able to take the steps independently to get help.

Some signs of depression.

- Persistent sad or "empty mood"
- Loss of interest or pleasure in ordinary activities
- Decreased energy, fatigue, being slowed down
- Sleep disturbances
- Eating disturbances
- Difficulty concentrating or making decisions
- Feelings of hopelessness, pessimism
- Irritability
- Thoughts of death or suicide
- Excessive crying
- Chronic aches and pains that don't respond to treatment

Take warning signs of suicide seriously. Seeking help is urgent. Call a mental health center or therapist, explain the emergency, and ask for immediate help if your friend or family member shows signs that he or she is thinking about committing suicide.

Signs of suicide.

- An abrupt change in personality
- Obsession with death
- Talk about suicide
- Mood swings
- A suicide plan
- Self destructive behavior
- Feelings of hopelessness and helplessness
- Alcohol or drug abuse
- A previous suicide attempt

- Changes in sleeping and eating patterns
- Isolation and withdrawal
- Hostility

These guidelines can help you talk to a suicidal person:

- Listen carefully. Do not give advice. Do not deny the feelings the person describes.
- Ask if the person is considering suicide. This does not cause people to consider suicide if they haven't already thought about it.
- Determine whether the person has a suicide plan.
- Do not become defensive. Try to remain accepting of his or her feelings.
- Do not delay dealing with the problem.
- Do not promise to keep suicidal intentions secret.
- Do not leave the person alone if you believe there is a danger of suicide.
- Call hotline phone numbers, a mental health center or a hospital emergency room for help.
- If the situation becomes life-threatening, call the police.

You can support friends or family members in important ways during tough times. Encouraging someone to seek professional help is one way to show you care.

Check out the Iowa Concern Hotline Web site at www.extension.iastate.edu/iowaconcern or call the hotline at 800-447-1985.

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