



# Heart to heart

## Talking with friends and family about mental health issues

Everyone has bad days from time to time. But what if someone you care about seems really troubled, stressed out or just “not themselves”? What if it happens a lot or goes on for a long time? What if you feel truly concerned about a loved one’s behavior, state of mind or well-being?

When a friend or loved one has mental or emotional distress, it can feel tricky to know what to say, how to say it and what to do next. At the same time, you may want to speak up out of concern and love — and to keep the person safe. Read on to learn how you can be both sensitive and helpful in such a situation.

### Recognizing symptoms of mental or emotional distress

The first step is to learn the signs of mental distress. Knowing these signs can give you more clarity about what you see, hear and experience. Some of the signs can include:

- Anxious, irritable or irrational behavior
- Mood swings
- Sleeping a lot or not at all
- Withdrawing from other people
- Not eating or eating a lot more than usual

- Trouble focusing on tasks
- Problems with memory
- Not washing, dressing or taking care of daily hygiene
- Acting paranoid or suspicious
- Hearing voices
- Thinking or talking about suicide

### When it’s time to talk

Starting the conversation can be hard. The person you’re worried about may not believe there’s anything wrong. If they’re paranoid, they may think you’re “out to get them” or hurt them. They may be frightened and confused.

So how can you approach the topic? First, pick a time when you’re both relaxed and have privacy. If the person has been drinking or using drugs, try to wait until he or she is sober. Speak calmly.

Avoid comments that sound like accusations. Instead of saying “You’ve been acting strange,” say what you’ve seen. Use “I” terms. For example, “I see that you’re not showering and getting dressed every day” or “I’ve noticed you’ve been down for quite a while.” Follow that by a sincere statement like, “I’m concerned about you.”

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## What to expect

Understand that there's no easy way to have this talk. You may be met with anger or denial. Try not to get upset, raise your voice or escalate the stress of the situation.

If you stay calm and assured, it may help your loved one hear you. Also, know that you may need to have this conversation more than once in order to make an impact. That is, unless you fear your loved one is unsafe — in which case you'll want to act right away.

## Ways to take action

In a "best case" scenario, you may be able to persuade your friend or family member to see their general doctor or a mental health professional. You can offer to make the appointment, drive them or stay with them. Your support may make getting help a more likely outcome.

You may be able to convince them to call a hotline. There are hotlines and referral lines for people who are experiencing mental stress or who are suicidal.\*

But remember, no matter how diplomatic you are, your message may not be heard. You may need to take further steps to ensure your loved one gets help and stays safe.

- You may have to take your loved one to an emergency room
- You may have to call 911 for assistance

## Helping shows you care

There's no script or guaranteed outcome for helping people who are experiencing mental distress. Remember they often feel tremendous emotional pain. They may be angry with you. They may not talk or act "like themselves."

But you can be yourself. You can have a better understanding of mental illness. You can be aware of signs and respond to situations that require intervention. You can be caring and effective.

You can make a difference.



\*To reach a hotline for any mental health crisis including suicide, call the National Suicide Prevention Hotline: **1-800-273-8255** (open 24/7) or visit the **live online chat**.

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