

Wellesley College Stone Center Counseling Service

How to Help a Friend

Living in a college community, there are likely to be times when you become concerned about someone else. This could be a friend, your roommate, or just someone you see in a class or in your dorm. You may not do anything about your concerns because you don't know how to help, or don't want to make things worse. Here are some guidelines to help you know what to do when you are concerned about someone else on campus.

When to be concerned Everyone experiences distress sometimes. Adjusting to college, experiencing academic stress, struggling with a recent break-up or having worries at home can all create some temporary difficulties. Any one of the following signs when taken alone, is not necessarily a sign of severe distress. However, when someone is experiencing several of them, or if they persist, then it may be indicative of more severe difficulties that warrant professional help.

- Deterioration of physical appearance or personal hygiene
- Excessive fatigue or sleep difficulties
- Skipping class or absence from other activities
- Difficulty completing schoolwork or other obligations
- Avoidance of friends or uncharacteristic social isolation
- Marked decrease in concentration, motivation or energy
- Visible increase or decrease in weight
- Looking sad, worried or preoccupied
- Irritability or temper outbursts
- Impulsive behavior or acting with poor judgement
- Direct statements about problems with family or friends
- Statements of hopelessness or comments about death, self-harm or suicide

It's okay to ask When you are concerned about a peer, you might hesitate to inquire further about her well-being. You may feel that it is an invasion of her privacy, or that talking about things will make it worse for her. If you know someone who you are concerned about, it is fine to express genuine interest or concern – they can always decline to talk with you if they are uncomfortable. In fact, authentic interest is often felt as caring by someone, and may be the opening she needs to talk about important things.

How to approach someone Choose a time and a place that is most likely to ensure privacy. Ask her how she is, in a way that really conveys you are interested in knowing the answer. Make eye contact and use your facial expression and tone of voice to convey your concern. If you have come to her out of concern, share with her the things you have noticed that worry you about her. You don't need to go into extensive detail or "build a case", but rather be honest about what you have noticed about her that has led to your concern. If she isn't interested in talking, you can let her know you are available if she would

like to talk at another time. You can remind her that there are many resources on campus that she can access if she wants help at any point.

When someone wants to talk Whether the conversation is initiated by you or by her, when it comes time to talk, the most important thing you can do is listen. Just by being an open, interested and supportive friend, you are providing important assistance to someone who is feeling upset or stressed. Ask occasional questions to help draw her out. Express empathy about how hard things have been. If you can relate to parts of what she's feeling, say that, but don't use this as a time to sound off yourself. You don't need to be an expert, or to give advice. In fact, this is not a helpful approach and you might get in over your head. Just talking might be enough to help her feel some relief, but if there are more serious concerns or you feel she should seek professional help, encourage her to do this. This doesn't mean you are "telling her she's crazy", but instead, that you are urging her to get the help she needs. Tell her that you think asking for help is a sign of strength.

Don't get sworn to secrecy Of course, when someone shares something deeply personal, it's important that you keep her confidence by not sharing this information casually with others. However, avoid making blanket promises of confidentiality that might make it harder for you to share your concerns with someone else, if needed. If your friend is at risk, it is important that you seek professional help right away and let them know the reasons for your concern – even if your friend has asked you not to. A student's safety must be the primary concern.

Take care of yourself While it is wonderful to be a kind and caring friend, you are also not responsible for solving her problems. Don't let yourself get in over your head. If you start to feel too burdened, overwhelmed or concerned about another student, it's time to ask a professional for help. If she won't get help herself, you can call the Stone Center Counseling Service and receive a confidential consultation about your friend. The counselor can assess the situation carefully and help you know the options available to assist the student. If you learn more about how the Counseling Service works, it might help you feel more comfortable about how to get her the help she needs.

Stone Center Counseling Service is free and available to all Wellesley students. There are four licensed clinicians, two consulting psychiatrists and six interns who comprise the Clinical Team. All information shared in counseling is kept confidential, in keeping with professional counseling guidelines. The office hours are Monday - Friday 8:30 a.m.- 4:30 p.m. During the academic year, a Stone Center staff clinician is also available by pager for evening and weekend emergencies. This on-call service can be accessed by calling X2810.

Campus Resources:

Stone Center Counseling Service **x2839**

Health Service **x2810**

Campus Police **x5555**

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