

## Conversation Guide: Talking to your friend about mental health

Starting a conversation about mental health can be difficult or feel overwhelming, but reaching out when someone is struggling can make a real difference. It shows them they're not alone and that you care.

Listening to them will be a priority, as well as respecting their boundaries as to how much they wish to tell you. An open and supportive conversation will not only help them feel empowered to speak about their feelings, the situation and potential next steps — it may also help them seek further support.

This guide will help you navigate these important conversations with confidence, compassion, and care.



## Approaching a conversation

### Spotting the signs of poor mental health

You might notice some of these concerning behaviours:

- **Withdrawing from friendships or groups**
- **Changes in mood and/or behaviour**
- **Becoming short-tempered or confrontational**
- **Changes in the way they usually communicate**
- **Loss of interest in activities they enjoyed**
- **Changes in appetite, eating more, less, or comfort eating**
- **Low energy and/or feeling tired**
- **Changes in sleep**
- **Difficulty concentrating and/or making decisions**
- **Seeming overwhelmed and/or stressed**
- **Talking negatively about themselves and sense of hopelessness**
- **Risky or self-destructive behaviour.**

### Listen and give them your full attention

#### Offer reassurance that you're there to listen.

Try not to be distracted with other things; it's important they know you're giving them your undivided attention and that you care about them. Remember that you don't need to find an answer and you aren't there to diagnose. You are supporting your friend so they feel encouraged and empowered to express their thoughts and feelings.

### Validate what they are saying

#### Expressing ourselves can be difficult, and your friend may struggle to put their thoughts into words.

Let them know their feelings are valid, reassuring them that they're not alone. Avoid making assumptions about their experiences, as this could make them feel misunderstood. Encourage them to share at their own pace and reaffirm you are offering a judgement-free space.

### Think creatively

#### If your friend is struggling to express themselves, encourage them to explore other ways of communicating,

such as writing down their thoughts to help them process their feelings. You will know what resonates with your friend so think of ways you can adapt and shape the conversation to support them. For example, you could walk and talk, they could role-play their responses, etc.

## What you can do to support your friend?

#### Clarify what your friend would like from you:

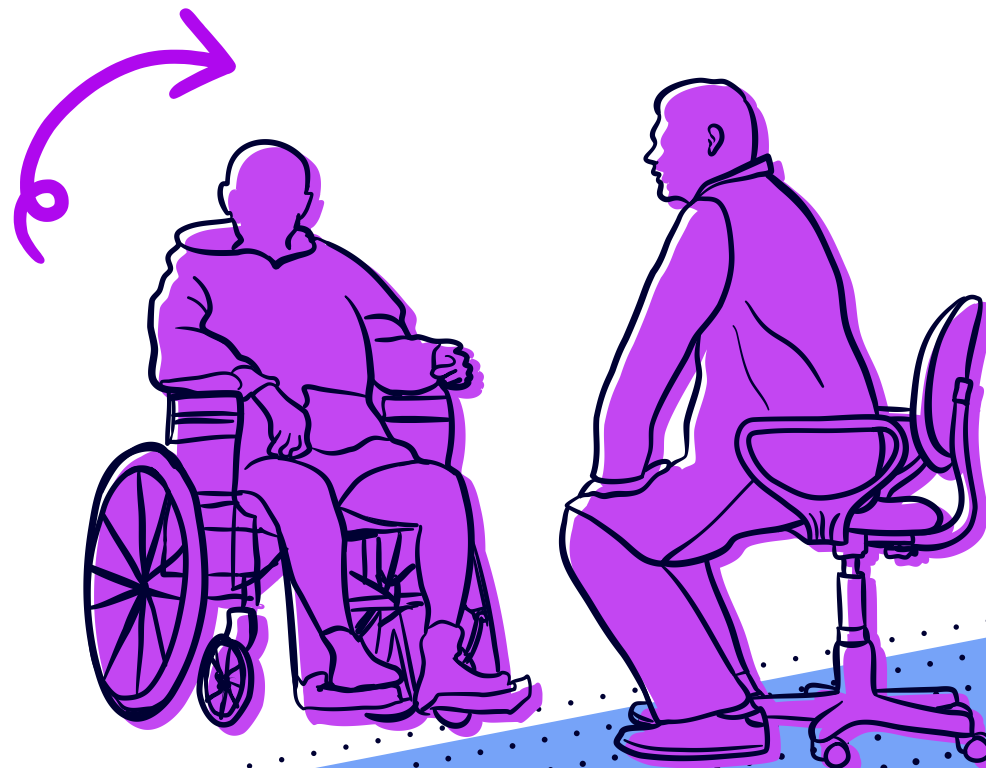
This will help you understand their expectations and explore boundaries as to how you can realistically help. For example, "What would be most helpful from me right now?" Supporting a friend doesn't mean you're their only source of support. It's important to signpost them to appropriate professional help, such as their GP, helplines, trusted teacher, or parent. If you don't feel comfortable with something they ask of you, let them know and confirm what you would be comfortable doing.

**You don't need to have all the answers:** It's okay if you don't know what to say to your friend or don't understand their situation or feelings. You're not expected to find an answer or solution. You are giving them time to offload, which is invaluable as they don't have to go through this alone. It might be helpful to be honest and flag this to them. For example, "I might not fully understand what you're going through, but your feelings matter."

**Normalise things:** Sometimes people can feel shy or embarrassed after these conversations. Continue activities you normally do with them, such as going to a café. If these activities are difficult for them for any reason, you could ask what they feel comfortable doing. It's important they know that nothing they shared has impacted on your friendship.

**Encourage and support action:** Sharing practical resources and taking supportive steps together can make a significant difference. You could brainstorm proactive steps and strategies they could take and offer to support them with this when appropriate. You could share websites, helplines, or other supportive resources you know of and can recommend. Be careful not to bombard them with signposting as it could be overwhelming. For example, "Would it be helpful if sent you links to a couple of websites that offer support?"

**Regular check-ins:** It would be helpful to check in with your friend after a few weeks to see how they are. This will let them know you are there to support them as they navigate their journey. You can also follow-up on the actions you agreed to proceed with or those they committed to. Respect their choices and pace, so they don't feel any judgement or pressure. Acknowledge progress to encourage and motivate them.



## Looking after yourself

**How do you manage confidentiality?** Your friend may share with you information that is sensitive, cause concern, or place you in a difficult position. Understanding how to manage confidentiality is essential when providing support and maintain the trust they have placed in you. Seek clarity from the outset and confirm at the end of the conversation what they want you to do with the information. If you feel uncomfortable with any aspect of confidentiality it would be best to flag this as soon as you can so that you can navigate it together.

**If you're worried for your friend's safety or of others:** You should speak to an appropriate adult, such as their teacher, parent, or local authority. Let your friend know you will be doing this because you care. They may disagree or be unhappy with your decision, but eventually they are likely to understand your intention was to help. For example, "What you've shared about having a plan to hurt yourself isn't something I can keep to myself. I care about you too much to keep this between us."

**It's okay to say you're finding things difficult:** For numerous reasons, listening to your friend might be causing you emotional strain and/or stress. You might feel you're unable to help them and feel powerless. It's important you are honest with them. Your wellbeing and resilience matters too. Letting them know of your boundaries and capacity to support helps them appreciate you're considering what they might need and models self-care. It might encourage them to seek professional support. For example, "I care about you, and want to continue supporting you. I'm just finding it a bit tough at the moment."

**Reaffirming boundaries:** We can end up doing things that we don't feel comfortable with and our boundaries might slip because we want to be helpful. Don't be afraid to repeat your boundaries, letting them know what you consider to be okay and what isn't. Navigate them together so that they can see you are respecting their boundaries and are asking the same.

**Taking time and reflecting:** Reflection after a conversation is an important for both you and your friend. It provides you the space to process what has been shared with you. It could also provide different perspectives or new ways of approaching the conversation next time.

**Practice self-care:** Do things that you enjoy and make you feel good, such as going for a walk, listening to music, etc. Your mental health and wellbeing are important. So take some time to reflect and restore your energy and wellbeing.



**The most important thing to remember is you don't have to do this alone — it's not all up to you.**

### Learn more about mental health conditions

If you want to learn more about different mental health conditions, we've got information on symptoms, treatments, and useful contacts on a variety of conditions. [mentalhealth-uk.org/help-and-information/conditions](https://www.mentalhealth-uk.org/help-and-information/conditions)



### Access the Hub of Hope

**Comprehensive online directory** connecting people to mental health support services in their local area across the UK. [hubofhope.co.uk](https://www.hubofhope.co.uk)



### Resources

**Access downloadable guides,** tools, and resources to support your mental health, enhance wellbeing, and build resilience, while also promoting awareness and understanding of mental health. [mentalhealth-uk.org/downloadable-resources](https://www.mentalhealth-uk.org/downloadable-resources)



### Health and Wellbeing

**Offers information and practical advice** on various factors affecting mental health, including work-life balance, stress, sleep, and movement. [mentalhealth-uk.org/health-and-wellbeing](https://www.mentalhealth-uk.org/health-and-wellbeing)

