

Overview

One of life's most challenging situations is helping yourself or a friend who's in distress. If you think about people you've known, you may realize that you've had friends or family members you've been worried about in the past. This may sound like a heavy topic, but it's also really common. Especially because when our friends feel overwhelmed, sad, or anxious, we're usually the first ones to notice and the first ones they come to when they need to talk. The following are all signs of distress that are fairly common on high school and college campuses:

- Seem overly anxious/stressed
- Have been sad/depressed for a long time
- Tell you they think about suicide
- Cut or hurt their bodies on purpose
- Have issues around food and eating
- Use alcohol or drugs excessively

It's important to know how to help a friend who's in distress. You're probably wondering:

- How do I know when I or a friend needs help?
- How do I talk to a friend I'm worried about?
- And where can my friend and I go for help if the situation seems too big to handle on our own?

To help you answer these questions, the next section will show four example scenarios of what you might experience with your own friends.

A Friend in Distress

It's important to keep an eye out for anyone who seems like they might need a little help: even the people we'd least expect.

Let's take a look at a group of friends who are all having a tough time this year:



Jesse

Jesse's involved in many on-campus groups, from criminal justice reform to homeless outreach. She's always there whenever a friend is having a tough time, but doesn't always know when to put herself first and others second.

More than once Jesse's chosen not to eat when she had a paper due and slept through a couple of her early morning classes because she was supporting a friend who went through a bad breakup.

Recently, Jesse showed up at the very end of her friend's birthday dinner because she got caught up making signs for a rally. She kept on apologizing to her friend for days afterwards, even after he said it wasn't a big deal.

What signs of distress do you think Jesse might be showing?

- Jesse seems overly anxious about missing activities and appears to have skipped eating some meals, prioritizing school work over her own well being.
- Jesse told her friend she wanted to take a little more time for herself, but hasn't changed her routine yet.



Rama

Rama is the child of Thai immigrants and the first in his family to pursue higher education. He often stays at home and works instead of going out.

Rama's father died a few months ago, which left his mother alone to take care of his two younger sisters. After the funeral, he mentioned that he wanted to do even better in school in his father's memory.

In the months since then, Rama has rarely spent time with people outside of projects for class. Even when he was invited to a friend's party, he said he'd try but didn't end up going. When asked about it, he said he got a C-minus on a recent test and felt too upset to leave the house.

What signs of distress do you think Rama might be showing?

- Rama has isolated himself from his friends in the months since his father's death and has been putting enormous pressure on himself to succeed academically.

A friend suggested that Rama might want to join a student support group specifically for people experiencing grief. After considering, Rama tried going to the group and found it helped to talk with people who shared similar feelings.



Maya

Maya came out as queer to her friends early this year and started seeing someone. After a few months they had a bad breakup and she took it pretty hard.

A couple of months after the breakup, Maya asked a friend for his help getting home from a party. Her friend found Maya high and disoriented.

A few days later Maya thanked her friend for helping her get home. She mentioned how embarrassed she was for not getting over the breakup yet.

What signs of distress do you think Maya might be showing?

- Maya has been experimenting with drugs excessively as a way to cope with her bad breakup.

A friend went with Maya to the school's LGBTQIA+ center, where she formed some new friendships. The center became a new supportive group in her life.



Travis

Travis' sister raises a child alone, which is a big cost for the family. He has to work thirty hours a week to help pay for school. He's mentioned that juggling everything has been a lot to balance, and sometimes he's felt overwhelmed.

Travis has little time to do anything other than attend classes, work, and babysit his sister's child. When he does have time off, he usually goes home with one or two six-packs of beer and finishes them himself.

A few days ago, Travis got upset about a group project and kicked a chair. When his friends checked in with him a few days later, he shrugged and said he didn't want to talk about it.

What signs of distress do you think Travis might be showing?

- Travis has been feeling discouraged about his situation and is pulling away from his friends. He's been drinking alone and doesn't seem to know a direction for himself.

Your other friends also have their ups and downs, but on the whole they seem able to adequately handle their day-to-day lives—but Travis's behavior is more extreme right now, and it might be worth checking in with him one-on-one.

You can check-in with your friends:

- In-person
- Over text
- Video or phone calls

In the next section, we'll explore some ways to talk to a friend in distress, like Travis, and help them in their time of need.

Conversation Skills

The most challenging part of talking to a friend about something sensitive is bringing it up without making the friend defensive. The following are skills that you'll want to keep in mind when talking to a friend, like Travis, who's struggling:

Use **neutral statements**. Avoid negative labels at all costs! They make the other person feel bad and don't help you reach out to them in an effective way.

- **Poor Example:** "Hey. What's up? You've been acting weird lately." If someone told you that you were acting "weird," you'd probably get defensive. You might shut down and stop listening.
- **Good Example:** "Hey. What's up? You've been quiet lately." Good! This doesn't label your friend and probably won't make him defensive.

Focus on **specific, observable behaviors**. And don't judge!

- **Poor Example:** "You've been drinking too much lately." Judgmental statements like these don't work for two reasons: First, it makes the other person feel terrible. Second, a judgment is just your opinion so your friend could deny it.
- **Good Example:** "You've been drinking more the last few months." In this example, you focused on specific, observable behaviors -- things your friend can't deny.

Soften your sentences by adding "I feel like," "I think," or "It seems like." When you speak from your own perspective, it lets them know how the situation looks from the outside. Some good examples:

- "It seems like you've been drinking more the last few months."
- "I think you've been drinking more the last few months."
- "I feel like you've been drinking more the last few months."

Ask **neutral questions** and don't give advice about sensitive topics unless you're asked. Imagine your friend said, "Guess so. It's just that my parents keep nagging me. They think I can't take care of myself anymore." You can respond with:

- **Poor Example:** “You should tell them how that makes you feel.” Unless they ask for your opinion, no one wants advice about something sensitive. It makes the other person feel like you don’t trust them to solve their own problems.
- **Good Example:** “Have you told them how you feel about that?” Notice that this is phrased as a question while still pointing your friend in the right direction.

Here are some more **helpful** things you might say to a friend like Travis:

- “It seems like you haven’t gotten over your break-up with Tia.”
- “You slept 13 hours yesterday.”
- “Why do you think your grades went down?”
- “I think you’re getting high more often lately.”

And here are some **unhelpful** things you might say:

- “Why were you rude to Mike the other day?”
- “You shouldn’t get so upset over a girl.”
- “I think you really messed up.”
- “Stop saying stuff like that to people.”
- “You were soooo sloppy drunk last night.”
- “How can you live like this?”

Getting Help

If your friend’s situation seems to be bad and getting worse, it may be more than they can handle on their own. It can also be concerning if they are reluctant to answer when you ask about suicide. Fortunately, there’s a place on campus where students can find professional counselors to help them meet challenges like stress, sadness, relationship issues, drug and alcohol abuse, and eating issues. **Campus mental health** services are confidential and available to students for free or at a highly reduced cost.

Your campus may offer the option to access professional counselors online or over the phone. Check the resources section for your school’s specific options.

We’ll go over a few more of these options and how they can benefit you and your friend in the next section.

Taking Care of Yourself

If you're not comfortable having this kind of conversation in real life, or if your friend doesn't agree to seek help, there are other options you can contact for advice or to simply talk to someone:

- Mental health services
- Faculty or staff
- RA or student leader

And if you ever think a friend is in immediate danger of harming themselves or someone else, you can also call:

- 911
- Campus security
- Crisis hotline

These resources are also there for you, in case you ever realize that you'd like support yourself. Check out the resources section in your menu for a list of supportive places in your school and community.

It's important to make **self-care** a habit. Where self-soothing is about de-stressing in the moment, self-care is about creating a routine to manage your long-term stress level. Imagine a glass that's full of water; the water is made up of stressful things like having a fight with your best friend or studying for finals. Sometimes adding just one more drop of stress is enough to make the glass overflow. By practicing self-care, you can increase the size of the glass - even though you might not be able to change the amount of stress you're dealing with, you'll be able to handle it a little easier.

There are a few different kinds of self-care: **psychological, emotional, physical, spiritual, and social**. These categories overlap, so as we explore each, think about which practices you do now, and which practices you'd like to add to your routine.



Psychological self-care

The things we think - negative or positive - can have a big effect on our mental health. That's why it's important to do things that support a healthy mindset. These can include:

- Take some time away: day trips or vacations
- Take a break from screen time
- Make time for self-reflection
- Check in with your thoughts, beliefs, attitudes, and feelings
- Engage in individual or group therapy
- Write in a journal
- Read something that is unrelated to academic work
- Try something new
- Say no to extra responsibilities sometimes

Tip: Consider the differences between what you're currently doing to take care of yourself, and what you'd like to be doing. A daily journaling exercise can also help invest in your psychological self. Before you go to bed each night, write down three things you're grateful for. That way, when you feel down, you have a premade list of things that make you feel thankful to flip through.



Emotional self-care

It's important to think about how much our thoughts can influence our emotions. Your emotions affect how you see the world, so it's important to know how to acknowledge and manage them. These can include:

- Spend time with others whose company you enjoy
- Stay in contact with important people in your life
- Give yourself praise and love
- Identify comforting activities, objects, people, and places, and seek them out
- Acknowledge your emotions and allow yourself to feel them fully
- Find things that make you laugh or bring you joy
- Express your opinions in social action, letters, donations, marches, or protests

Tip: It can be tough to remember to spend time investing in our own emotional well-being. One way is to take moments to stop and praise yourself when you accomplish positive actions - no matter how small.



Physical self-care

It's also important to invest in your physical self for your overall health. Taking care of your body helps to support your mental wellness. You could do this by getting physical activity, eating well, or getting enough sleep. This can include:

- Eat when you're hungry, stop when you're satisfied
- Eat healthily
- Get regular checkups
- Get medical care when needed
- Take time off when sick
- Do various stress-relief techniques such as meditation, massage, yoga,
- Dance, swim, walk, run, play sports, or do some other fun physical activity
- Get enough sleep and stick to a regular sleep schedule

Tip: Many people have issues with body image. One way to think about this issue is the idea of form vs. function. Now, instead of eating and working out in order to improve how your body looks (your form), aim to improve how your body works and feels (your function). While you may have negative thoughts every now and then, it can give you something positive to focus on.



Spiritual self-care

Spiritual self-care is a way to connect with who you are and who you want to be deep down. These can include:

- Make time for reflection
- Spend time in nature
- Find a spiritual connection or community
- Be open to inspiration
- Be optimistic and hopeful
- Be aware of non-material aspects of life
- Be open to not knowing
- Identify what is meaningful to you and notice its place in your life
- Meditate
- Sing
- Contribute to causes in which you believe
- Read inspirational literature or listen to inspirational talks or music

Tip: A grounding meditation technique can be useful. If you feel overwhelmed, take a moment to notice how every part of your body feels. This can help keep you grounded in the now, and take your mind off your anxieties.



Social self-care

Social self-care is investing in the creation and maintaining of your close relationships. These are the people in your life who will be there to support you when you need it.

These can include:

- Make time to see friends
- Schedule regular dates with your partner
- Call, check on, or see your relatives
- Stay in contact with faraway friends
- Make time to reply to personal messages
- Allow others to do things for you
- Expand your social circle
- Ask for help when you need it
- Share a fear, hope, or secret with someone you trust

Tip: It's important to think about the people in our lives who are there to help support us, whether they be the last person you laughed or cried with, and reach out to them – even just to say hi.

Even though there are a lot of aspects of self-care to keep in mind, the most important thing to remember is that the best self-care routine for you is one you can maintain. No matter how small the changes you make are, they'll still matter.

Try out a few different exercises or practices, see what you can fit into your schedule, and what makes you feel best right now. Keep in mind this is a dynamic process - some exercises might be more helpful at different times in your life than others.

We all face distress sometimes, so making sure that we're there for our friends and ourselves sets us all up for success.