



**Supportive
School**

RECOGNIZING A PEER IN CRISIS

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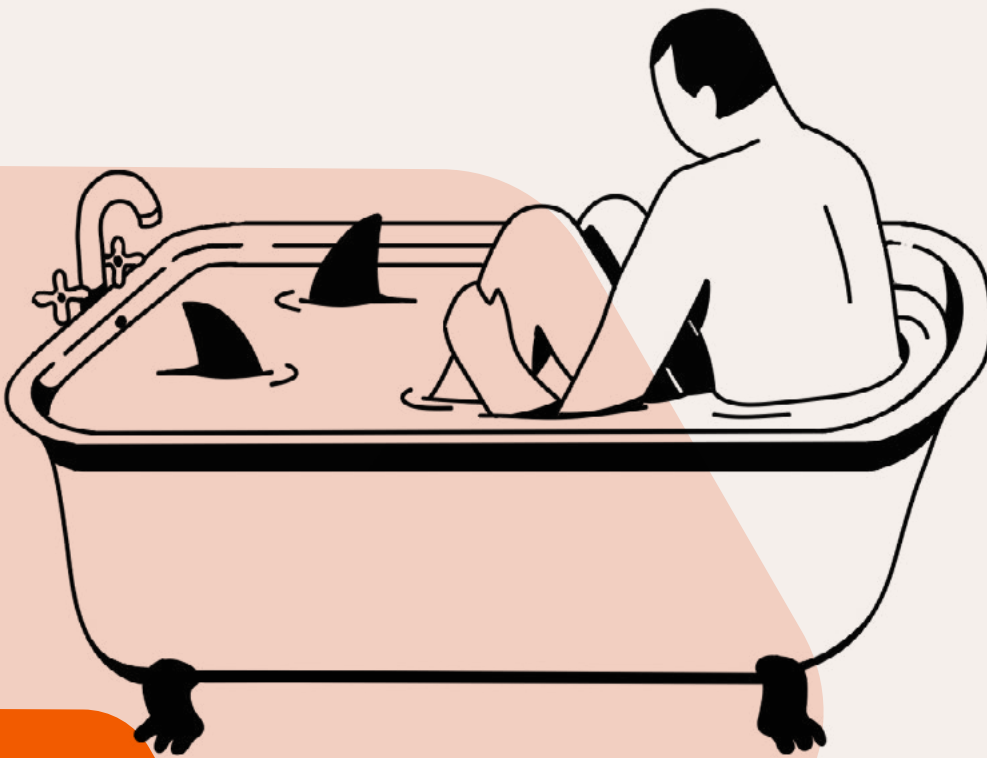
Introduction

You spend a lot of time with your friends, both at school and in your spare time. You are in class together and spend time together during breaks, school trips or extracurricular activities. Even if you only interact online, every day you have plenty of opportunities to watch the people around you and notice any behavior or speech that may cause concern. Maybe you have been asking yourself how you can tell if a friend is going through something difficult. It is not always obvious, so here are some examples of moods and behaviors indicating that a friend may need your help:

- sadness, depression, irritability, frequent crying
- indifference, loss of joy and spontaneity
- getting angry easily, becoming irritable
- frequent arguments and conflicts with peers

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- isolation, not talking to anybody
 - difficulty remembering things and focusing; being easily distracted
 - absences from school or extracurricular activities
 - not preparing for class, not doing homework
 - constant fatigue, lack of energy, bad mood
 - feelings of loneliness and abandonment by others, rejecting offers of help
 - no self-confidence
 - disturbing pictures, posts, videos sent in messages or posted on social networking sites

- frequently saying things like: *Nothing makes sense. This is not going to work anyway. Don't waste your time with me. It doesn't matter, nobody is going to help me anyway. Nobody cares about me. I fail at everything. I am only a nuisance to everyone.*
- alcohol or drug abuse
- no confidence about the future
- self-harm
- suicidal thoughts



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How should you talk to a friend in crisis?

Talking to a friend who is in crisis is the first step toward learning what they are going through and struggling with. First, you can say:

I can see you have been sad lately and you have been crying a lot. I am very worried about you and I think you are going through something difficult. I would like to talk to you about it to understand you better. Is there anything I can do for you?

or

I have noticed that you have recently been skipping class and you don't talk to anyone when you are at school. I am worried about you and I'm wondering if everything is alright. Please, tell me what's wrong. How can I help you?

Remember to stay calm as you start the conversation, be kind and show genuine interest in your peer's situation. You might be the first person to listen to them talk about their struggles and show them some comprehension. Your friend's mood may trigger various emotions in you, but it is crucial to acknowledge that the person is suffering and experiencing feelings of sadness, irritability, or depression. To support them, you can say:

I can see that things are difficult for you.
I am here for you if you want to talk about it.
Together, we can think about where to seek help.
I can only imagine what you must be feeling.
There is nothing wrong in asking for help.
I want to support you through your challenges.

Avoid statements which may hurt or additionally depress your friend such as:

You will be fine.
Cheer up! Think positively.
Try not to think about it.
I went through that as well. It will pass, you'll see.
I don't know how to help you.
We need to help you get a grip!

Sometimes, you might not know what to tell your peer. Admit to it openly, but emphasize how important it is that they decided to tell you about their difficulties.

Thank you for sharing your problems with me. I don't know what I can say right now, but it's good that you told me what you are going through.

I suspect it must have been quite difficult for you to tell me about this. I appreciate your opening up to me.



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Showing support and offering help

Initiating a conversation, listening to your friend and showing interest in their problems are extremely important elements in offering your support. Whether or not they openly discuss their issues with you, it is always worth emphasizing that **challenges are surmountable**. It is important because at that particular point in time, your friend might be feeling down and be at a loss as to what to do and where to seek help. Remember, however, that supporting is not about offering ready-made advice or solutions, but about trying to find the best way out of a difficult situation together and exploring various options. It is also a good idea to help your peer in crisis to plan small but feasible steps they can take at that particular time and to motivate them to follow through—and especially to make use of the help offered to them.

Young people would be well advised to seek help from adults in challenging situations. Remember to suggest that they talk to their parents, a teacher, psychologist, the school counselor or a coach. Another way to consult a supportive adult is to call a helpline for children and adolescents, e.g. at 116 111. You can call them for free and on an anonymous basis. Be aware that you yourself can also use such assistance and talk to an adult you trust or a helpline consultant about anything in your friend's behavior that worries you. Discuss how you can help them and how this situation affects you.

When supporting a peer in crisis, be available to them, either in person or over the phone. However, stay mindful of your own boundaries and needs. If it becomes evident that your peer requires assistance, approach the situation wisely and ensure they do not expect to rely solely on your help, choosing not to seek assistance from others. It takes many people to overcome a crisis—both professionals and those from the individual's community (parents, teachers, school specialists, peers, etc.). Helping a friend through a crisis should not be harmful to you, create an excessive burden on you or lower your self-esteem. If you notice any signs

PEER SUPPORT IN 10 STEPS

If you notice that a friend is sad or silent, avoids other people and does not want to talk to anybody, does not socialize, does not answer the phone or read your messages, it might mean that they are going through something difficult in their life. It is crucial not to be indifferent and to react. Below you can find some tips about what to remember, how to talk to your friend and what to pay attention to.

1. Always take seriously any disturbing signs you notice in a person struggling with difficulties. Be understanding and accept that they are suffering, feeling sad, irritated or depressed.
2. Stay calm, be kind and show genuine interest in your peer's situation.

3. Encourage them to talk to you by asking: *Please tell me how you feel. What is bothering you? How can I help you? Is there anything I can do for you?*

4. Avoid statements which can be hurtful or understood as dismissive of the other person's experience, e.g. *Try not to think about it. I've been through this as well. It will pass, you'll see. I don't know how to help you. We need to help you get a grip!*

5. Use statements that show support: *I am worried about you. Together, we can think about where to seek help. I am here for you if you want to talk about it. I can see things are difficult for you, I want to be there for you to help you resolve your problems.*

6. Help your peer in crisis to plan small but feasible steps and motivate them to follow through—and especially to get help.

7. Help them to explore various ways to overcome the crisis, e.g. suggest talking to an adult you trust—a parent, teacher, school counselor or psychologist, or calling a helpline for children and adolescents at **116 111**. Remember that you can also use these services and talk to an adult about anything in your friend's behavior that worries you.

8. Be available but do not forget about your own boundaries and needs. If it turns out that your peer needs help—be smart about it, so that your involvement does not take control or autonomy away from them and so that they do not shift the responsibility for solving the problem onto you.

9. When supporting a friend, do not try to do it all alone. Nobody is a superhero, which means that we all need allies when we try to help others. Helping a friend should not be detrimental to you.

10. You might not know what to do if the person you are trying to help asks you to keep it secret. Remember that if their health or life is at stake, or if they are being seriously hurt (e.g. peer violence, sexual abuse), any young person who becomes aware of the situation is strictly obliged to disclose such information to an adult, such as a parent, teacher, school counselor or psychologist.





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