



Being a Friend in Need: How to Help — With Boundaries

Two of the most important things we can offer each other in a time of need are emotional validation and connection. Having someone who will listen without judgment or hasty problem solving is a gift. Being that person for a friend, colleague or family member can be gratifying, but it helps to understand your boundaries and be open to seeking or suggesting outside help.

Building Boundaries

You can be a great friend, a good person and a helpful colleague while keeping firm boundaries. Consider what is important to you, how you want to offer support and how much capacity you have. Ask yourself without judgment, “What is a self-compassionate amount of time to offer, and how can I be clear with people about that?”

Sometimes a personal rights statement can be a helpful guide in setting boundaries. It might include:

- I have the right to say no.
- I have the right to my own needs for personal space and time even if others would prefer my company.
- I have the right to not take responsibility for someone else’s behavior, feelings or problems.
- I have the right to not have to anticipate other’s needs and wishes.
- I have the right to ask for what I want.

In the Moment

When you’ve offered to be there for a person in emotional distress, it’s important to listen deeply without focusing on your own thoughts, what you might say next or what you think about what’s being said. Set aside screens, put down cell phones and actively focus on the conversation.

It’s possible, even likely, that as you actively listen and validate what you hear, you may feel at a loss about what else you can do. Be kind to yourself. You have listened and you have also avoided an impulse to defend or problem solve. At this point, it’s fine to acknowledge that you don’t know what to say. Go with the truth: “I don’t know what to say. I care about you and I want you to know that I’m here to listen. You’re not alone.”

Getting Backup

Remember that you don’t have to manage the support of those in need on your own. Sometimes it makes sense to reach out.

Connecting your friend with a therapist might be the next step, especially if their level of anxiety or depression is so high that it’s having an impact on your own mental health. If you have someone who may benefit from outside help, you can try a resource like the National Alliance for Mental Illness. They have local chapters listed on their website along with a multitude resources and guides.

If the situation feels especially worrisome, you can call the National Suicide Prevention hotline at 1-800-273-TALK. You will be connected to a trained person to describe what your friend or family member is doing or saying. They can then talk you through options and resources, or simply offer you the support you need in that moment.

The Institute for Health & Healing is an integrative medicine group that offers a personalized approach to your care. In our network of Bay Area and Sacramento clinics, we provide evidence-based medicine that blends contemporary biotechnical medicine with holistic care, going beyond symptom treatment to serve the whole person.

Providers on our teams—from physicians to psychotherapists to manual therapists and Chinese medicine practitioners—incorporate mind-body medicine techniques as part of our comprehensive integrative care.

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