

SUPPORTING SOMEONE WHO'S EXPERIENCING MENTAL DISTRESS

When someone is experiencing mental distress, friends and loved ones form a key part of a person's network of supports and can help them through some tough times. Here are some ways you can support someone who needs it.

FOLLOW UP

Having one conversation about their mental health is good but follow up is essential. Check in on them. In that initial conversation, you might decide together what those check ins look like: are they every day? Once a week? Over a coffee, or a movie, or just sending a meme?

Deciding on ways to follow up help set expectations of each other and what your support will look like.

TRUST

Take the time to strengthen the relationship you have with this person, so they can trust you when they need support. Get to know who they are and how they interact so you can better tailor your approach.

ASK

Ask them how they're feeling, or what's going on for them. Before talking to them, make sure they feel safe and comfortable. Approach them in a way that is attentive to their individual needs and personality.

OBSERVE

Self-monitoring is very helpful for a person experiencing distress. You can help them by working together to observe and identify patterns of behaviour or warning signs that they might be starting to experience distress, and develop a plan to manage the distress should those warning signs occur in future.

LISTEN

Listen with an active and reflective presence, and without judgement. Try paraphrasing what they're telling you, to make sure you're both on the same page.

Be comfortable with pauses and silence; let them find their words.

REFER

It takes a village: we need a network of supports to maintain good mental health. Have a good sense of what other forms of support are available to this person should they need them, whether that be other friends or loved ones, or professional services like counsellors or phone lines.

EMPATHISE

Take the time to understand what's going on for them. Putting yourself in their shoes will give you compassion and help them feel less isolated. Show them that you're on their team, that you care.

CONTINGENCY PLANS

Once you have a sense of what other support options this person has, check in with them about who you might be able to turn to should something happen or the situation becomes unsafe, for example their GP, psychologist, or emergency services if there is imminent danger. Make a note of relevant contact numbers and have them on hand.

AGENCY

While sometimes advice can be helpful, it can also sometimes be patronising, or not wanted. Give the person you are supporting the agency to make their own decisions. Talk to them about how much agency they need, and how much help might be too much.

Some people might love it if you brought them home cooked meals and called health services for them, others might find that overbearing. Instead of trying to 'fix' how they're feeling, hold space for it.

SELF-CARE

You can't pour from an empty cup! It's important to make sure that you're feeling strong, capable, and resilient before you try to help others. Take time out to look after yourself and do the things that help you build your resilience. This might mean adopting some boundaries to ensure you have time for yourself.