Helping A Friend in Need

Stress is a normal part of our lives. We experience it during times of transition and change. Often, people can cope with stressful circumstances by recognizing that the situation may be temporary and/or drawing on their own strengths to adjust to stressful events. There are times, however, when stress can be long standing and become overwhelming. It is in these situations that we may begin to see observable changes in someone’s behavioral and emotional state.

When someone you know is struggling with the stresses of life, knowing how to help is crucial. Helping another person who is in distress involves listening, understanding, and caring. However, it is possible that you may not always be able to help your friend in need, and direction to professional services may be warranted. The following are some suggestions about how to “be there” for a friend, while not becoming over-involved or taking on too much responsibility for the other person’s life. Consider these suggestions as you assume a helping role with a friend in need.

Do not ignore the changes you may be observing. Attempt to approach your friend in a nonjudgmental manner to let him/her know you are concerned. Talk with your friend directly about your concerns. Specifically, describe the behaviors and the moods that you have observed in your friend that concern you. State how you see these behaviors/moods having a negative effect on your friend. Letting the other person know you are concerned shows you care and may help your friend look at what he/she is experiencing.

In talking with your friend, it is important to use “I” statements. Share with your friend your feelings in the form of a statement such as: “I am concerned about how withdrawn and sad you appear to be.” Using an “I” statement helps to decrease defensiveness on the part of your friend as you share with him/her what you have been observing.

After approaching your friend with your concerns, it is important to listen to what he/she has been experiencing. The art of listening involves focusing your attention, not only on your friend’s spoken words but also on the meaning and emotions behind those words. Listening involves hearing the other person’s concerns from his/her own point of view. Remember, you are not listening if you are focused on your own problems or are over-focused on how to respond. Often, when hearing someone else describe his/her difficulties, you may be tempted to offer advice and solutions to his/her problems. Although advice is given with a sincere desire to help the person feel better, most often advice can be useless and unhelpful if given before the person has expressed him or herself fully.

You may feel that listening is passive and that you are not doing enough for the person in distress. However, it is important to remember that effective listening involves communicating your attentiveness, and this requires energy. It involves maintaining eye contact, asking questions for clarification, validating your friend’s experiences, reflecting back what you hear, possibly extending a touch, and summarizing what has been said. If you find that you are being rejected for what you say, you may want to ask yourself if you are truly listening effectively. It can be easy to slip into the advice giving role or to talk about your own experience rather than allowing the person the time to communicate his/her troubles. Remember to listen in a non-judgmental and non-critical manner.
Listening needs to be done in an atmosphere where the other person feels he/she can express anger, frustration, sadness or despair. It can be easy to avoid emotional content and merely reassure the other person that he/she will be alright. Many of us want to help the other person in distress by trying to say or do something to make the situation better. However, moving too quickly can leave the other person feeling unheard and that it is not okay to express his/her feelings. It is important to remember that before a person can deal with his/her feelings completely, he/she needs to express them fully. Simply sitting with someone as he/she talks about his/her experience shows support and understanding and can be more helpful than any advice that may be given to solve a problem.

Often, simply being a good listener may be all that is needed. It is important to remember that all a person may need is a place to express him/herself and have someone listen. Remember, however, that the distressed person may not always feel better after talking. For example, an individual who has had a loss of a significant relationship may need weeks or months to grieve. You can be supportive during this time by communicating an understanding and acceptance of the grief. Your support over time can help the individual move on to other relationships that provide meaning.

Friends who we just can’t seem to help

Over time, you may encounter a friend who is difficult to help. This person may be dealing with a situation that is beyond your skill level, may be unable to identify the true root of his/her distress, may be resistant to seeking out alternatives to his/her situation, or may talk constantly about the same problem without taking steps to resolve it. In these circumstances, it is helpful to suggest the person seek professional help. You may say to this person: “I know this is a difficult time for you, but you may want to consider talking with someone in the Counseling Center who is trained to deal with issues like yours.” Emphasize that a professional listener can be more objective than you can, that seeking help is a sign of health, strength, and maturity, and that talking to a professional is confidential. You may also want to share your own positive experiences with getting help, if applicable. If your friend is resistant to seeking help, you can always talk with a counselor in the Counseling Center about how to approach this specific friend.