



HELPING A FRIEND WITH DEPRESSION OR ANXIETY

Having feelings of depression and anxiety from time to time is part of being human. However, when these feelings seriously affect a person's day-to-day life, it may mean he or she has depression or an anxiety disorder.

If a friend is feeling down for a long period of time, behaving in an unusual way or overwhelmed by their anxiety, it can be hard to know what to do. If you're worried about someone, **LOOK** for warning signs, **LISTEN** without judging, take the time to **TALK** about what's going on and **SEEK HELP** together.

KNOWING WHEN HELP IS NEEDED

Everybody feels sad or down sometimes. But *depression* is more than short-term sadness. It's a medical condition that can change how someone thinks, feels and behaves and affects his or her enjoyment of life. People experiencing depression may feel hopeless or helpless, lose interest in what they usually enjoy, be angry or irritable, lack energy, experience changes in sleeping or eating, or cry a lot for no reason.

Feeling anxious occasionally is also normal, for example before an exam. But an *anxiety disorder* is far more intense and can go on for weeks or months. There are many types of anxiety disorders and the symptoms vary. Some people have sudden unexplained panic attacks that can seem out of their control, while others experience phobias like agoraphobia (fear of being in an open space). Many people experience recurrent thoughts that cause them to feel anxious. They often recognise these thoughts as being silly, but having these thoughts can still lead to compulsive behaviour such as needing to check and re-check things, or repeat certain actions (such as washing their hands).

LOOKING FOR WARNING SIGNS

Sometimes it can be difficult to work out if a friend, boyfriend, girlfriend or a family member is just having a rough time or whether something more serious is going on. Here are some examples of warning signs.

- **Drops out of the crowd** – doesn't return calls, isn't keen to go out and doesn't seem to enjoy things he or she used to love.
- **Not sleeping properly** – can't sleep at night and spends a lot of the day in bed with the curtains closed.
- **Is out of control** – used to be quite sensible but is drinking heavily or using drugs and takes risks, like drinking and driving.
- **Feels down** – cries a lot for no reason, is negative about everything, and often overreacts to things people say.
- **Looks and feels bad** – looks a mess. May have lost or gained a lot of weight.
- **Has an attitude problem** – hardly talks and snaps at you when he or she does.
- **Can't go out** – is afraid to go out of a safety/comfort zone because of overwhelming anxiety.

When someone you care about isn't acting the way they normally do, it can be hard to know what to say. Sometimes the most difficult thing is working out how to start a conversation. It's important to choose a time when you're both free to talk and a place where you both feel comfortable. You might want to start by saying something like "I've noticed you seem a bit down lately..." and take it from there.

LISTENING

Once the conversation starts, your job is to listen. Your friend may not want advice, but just want to talk things through. Listen as much as you can, and try to work out how they're feeling. You can help your friend by maintaining eye contact, sitting in a relaxed position and asking open-ended questions that can't be answered with just 'yes' or 'no'. Save your suggestions or advice for later but let him or her know you're there for them.

Sometimes when people are feeling down, they find it hard to talk about their thoughts and feelings and even get angry. If this happens, stay calm, be fair, respect their limits, admit you're wrong if you are, and don't get angry yourself.

It may be that they don't want to talk about it at that time, so don't take it personally. You could offer to meet another time or let them know they can always get in touch if they need to talk. Making the time to be with them can be a good way to show that you care and might also help you to understand their thoughts and feelings.

SEEKING HELP TOGETHER

If you think someone may be experiencing depression or an anxiety disorder, encourage him or her to seek help, for example from a counsellor or doctor. The person may not have the energy to get the help they need themselves, which is where you come in. You might also offer to go with them if they do decide to speak to someone about how they're feeling. If they don't feel comfortable with the first health professional they see, you could help them to find another – the main thing is that they don't give up on getting help.

There are many services available to young people. Youthbeyondblue Fact sheet 3 – *Getting help for depression or anxiety* explains how to use these services. Other contact points are given at the end of this fact sheet.

Young people who have depression may be at risk of suicide, and if so, they need urgent help. Consult a doctor, the emergency department of your local hospital or a mental health professional (like a psychologist or psychiatrist).

TAKING CARE OF YOURSELF

Sometimes, when you're worried about someone, it feels like you're all alone. It's important that you take care of yourself as well. Try to take time out to relax and enjoy things, like sport, friends, music or going for a walk to keep yourself feeling okay. You may also want to speak to someone you trust, such as a family member, friend or counsellor.



KEY POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Although your first reaction may be to tell someone who is down to 'cheer up', because everything will be fine, this may come across as you not taking them seriously and can make things worse.
- Finding out more about depression and anxiety might help you to better understand what your friend might be going through and the reasons for his or her reactions to you.
- Even though you can offer support, you are not responsible for your friend's actions or behaviours. If they aren't willing to help themselves, it's *not* your fault.
- It might take time for your friend to accept help, either from you or someone else. It might also take some time to find a treatment that works best for them.
- If your friend doesn't want to talk to you about their problems, try not to take it personally. Sometimes it's easier to talk to someone you don't know about what's troubling you.



LOOK

for the signs of depression



TALK

about what's going on



LISTEN

to your friends' experiences



SEEK HELP

together!

MORE INFORMATION AND SUPPORT

You can speak to trained counsellors by phoning these 24-hour telephone counselling services:

Lifeline 13 11 14 (cost of a local call)

Kids Help Line 1800 55 1800 (freecall)

Information and support is also available from the following websites:

beyondblue www.youthbeyondblue.com or www.beyondblue.org.au

Information on depression, anxiety and how to help a friend

headspace www.headspace.org.au

Information, support and help near you

ReachOut.com www.reachout.com

Information and support for young people going through tough times

National LGBT Health Alliance

www.lgbthealth.org.au Information and support for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and other sexuality, sex and gender diverse people (LGBT)

The websites below can help you to find health services in your area. They list services that are either free of charge or low cost:

Kids Help Line www.kidshelp.com.au

Lifeline Service Finder

www.lifeline.org.au/service_finder

If you or a friend want to communicate with someone via email or online, Kids Help Line offers confidential, non-judgemental, emotional support 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

SOURCES This fact sheet is based on information from:

- **beyondblue** www.youthbeyondblue.com and www.beyondblue.org.au
- **headspace** www.headspace.org.au
- **ReachOut.com** www.reachout.com

Visit: www.youthbeyondblue.com

Info line: **1300 22 4636** Email: infoline@beyondblue.org.au

beyondblue: the national depression initiative

