

12 tips to support someone experiencing mental health challenges

If you or someone you know is in crisis, please call one of the following national helplines: Lifeline **13 11 14**, Suicide Call Back Service **1300 659 467**

If you believe there is immediate danger, call 000 or go a hospital Emergency Department.

1. Ask how they are feeling

Often when people are experiencing distress, others know about it, but say nothing. This simple question communicates care.

2. Listen to what they say

Put your phone away and focus completely upon the other person. Let them tell you how it is. Don't start talking about yourself, but try to reflect back what they are saying in different words to let them know you are tuned in.

Listening is an act of love because it focuses on the other. James commands us to be quick to listen and slow to speak (James 1:19). Or as the wise counsel of the book of Proverbs says, "To answer before listening, that is folly and shame" (Proverbs 18:13). Listening can be a first step to help someone move forward.

3. Be a safe person for them

It's okay to say, "Tell me more," but don't push them to share more than they want. Let them go at their own pace. It takes courage and trust to open up. Such trust is earned through gentleness, kindness, and respect.

4. Check that they are safe

If you are concerned about the level of their emotional distress, you do no harm by asking, "Are you thinking about taking your life?" Asking this question shows you care and will decrease their risk.

If you have concerns and are not sure what to do, call Lifeline (13 11 14) together. If you believe there is immediate danger, call 000 or go a hospital Emergency Department.

5. Seek professional help if needed

Ask if they have seen their GP. If they haven't, encourage them to do so and offer to assist by making an appointment or providing transport. A GP will make an assessment and refer to a mental health professional if necessary.

6. Ask what has helped them in the past

Many who experience emotional distress have been in dark places before. Most likely, they are resourceful and resilient and have continued to persevere through significant hardship. Be curious about the inner strengths, activities, resources and supports they drew upon. Encouraging them to connect with the people who have supported them in the past is especially beneficial.

Drawing their attention to their proven ability to move forward can foster hope.

7. Ask if you can read God's word and pray

God's word is another wonderful means of cultivating hope. Remind them that God is all loving, all caring, all seeing and that he can hear their silent groans in that tunnel. Remind them that he is with them and is their helper. Ask if you can read a couple of verses from the Bible with them. Share something that has recently encouraged you, or a few verses from Psalms, and then ask if you can pray. Focus on who God is and how much he loves them and what he has graciously done for them. They need God's word of comfort and consolation.

8. Encourage wise behaviour

Good habits of exercise, nutrition, and sleep promote wellbeing. Another helpful habit is thankfulness. Give them a nice blank book and suggest that each day they jot down three things they are thankful to God for. They might find this hard to do, but over time, this will help them notice the positives in their life.

Encourage them to connect with others – at church or in their local community – and to do things they enjoy.

9. Follow them up

Offer to meet up for coffee or for a walk in a park to find out how they are getting along. Those experiencing mental health challenges often think that no one could be bothered to spend time with them.

10. Set limits in your relationship or conversation

Agreeing to every request or demand is not necessarily loving or helpful. Love acts in the best interests of the other. It is not loving to enable selfish, irresponsible, or overly dependent behaviour. Our goal is to support them in their personal growth so they can live as fruitful and productive lives as possible. Usually, it's best not to do for others what they can do for themselves. So, be clear and firm about what you will and will not do. For example:

- “No, I won't be able to drop in every afternoon. I can come next Friday though, and we can chat then.”
- “It's not okay to scream at people like that.”
- “I switch off my phone at 9pm and won't respond to any texts during the night.”
- “No, I won't pick up some vodka for you on the way over.”

Setting appropriate limits requires wisdom, which is worth praying for (James 1:5)!

11. Take care of yourself

Caring for another carries a physical and emotional cost. You care for your own wellbeing not to be selfish, but to enable you to continue to love others.

12. Remember that you are not responsible for someone else's emotional or spiritual wellbeing

The Bible encourages us to offer support and care for others by bearing one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2). But ultimately, we are responsible for our own choices and behaviour, not that of others, “for each one should carry their own load” (Galatians 6:5). The quality of another's mental health does not rest on our shoulders.