

Getting Help: Help for a Friend

It can be very uncomfortable to talk to someone about a problem. Sometimes we might feel nervous because we don't want to offend someone or intrude in their lives. People are surprised, however, to find that their concern is usually appreciated when it is expressed in a respectful way.

Trust your intuition if you think there is a problem, and know that your compassion and efforts may prevent the unnecessary suffering or institutionalization of an older friend. Remember that most problems don't happen overnight – they usually have a slow progression that can be missed even by persons closest to the individual. Your concern might bring important insight and may prompt action to protect your friend from harm.

People generally keep their same personality and behavioral traits throughout their lives. Marked personality changes are not a normal part of aging and are likely indicate a problem. Because there are so many things that can cause health, mood, behavior and attitude changes in later life, it is important not to play the role of doctor or therapist. It is not your job to make the diagnosis or to figure it all out.

The best you can do is note changes and symptoms and then speak with your friend, or make a helpful connection with a community service or care provider.

Tips for talking with a person you think needs help:

- Avoid blaming language and tone
- Be a good listener, express appreciation for their feelings
- Educate and dispel myths, tell them what you know or have learned about symptoms or problems
- Instill hope, offer support and resources, explore their resources –whom do they go to for help?
- Have the conversation in a calm and familiar environment where there aren't distractions and the other person feels comfortable
- Avoid having the conversation in the midst of a crisis or an argument – you don't want the person to feel angry or defensive
- Express appreciation for the individual's friendship and your intent to be helpful
- Avoid judgment and accusations
- Offer specific things that you've noticed that are of concern and ask if the individual has noticed any changes or problems
- Offer to assist the person as next steps are planned or made
- Reinforce that they deserve better health and joyful living
- Appreciate how difficult it might be for your friend to admit to a problem or ask for help
- Reassure your friend that he/she can trust you and call on you for help down the line

What You Need to Know...



- Give your friend a list of resources for support in case they want to use them at a later time
- Never promise anything you can't deliver
- Follow up, talk to them later about the conversation and any outcomes
- Appreciate that your friend might take action without wanting to share information
- Remember that denial is a barrier to all kinds of treatment and don't take their denial personally
- Consult a professional for guidance or help if you expect that the situation is dangerous or particularly difficult
- Have a plan ready in case the person agrees and wants to seek help quickly

For more information, contact Mental Health America of Wisconsin at (414) 276-3122 or visit us on the web at www.mhawisconsin.org.

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