

The American Counseling Association's "*Counseling Corner*" Weekly Columns

How To Be There When A Friend Needs Help

from the American Counseling Association

Relatives are important to most of us, despite the fact that they're people we're sort of stuck with as a side-effect of being born into a particular family. But friendships can be just as important, or even more important, because our friends are people we've chosen to have a relationship with.

Friends are people we value, care about and with whom we want to feel close. All of that is why it can be very upsetting when we discover or observe something troubling about a friend. It can be a struggle trying to decide whether to confront our friend directly or to avoid the issue in case we're wrong and might damage the friendship.

But the bottom line is you do want to help if this is someone you truly care about. It's therefore important to find ways to discuss the potential problem while minimizing the chances of ruining the friendship.

A starting point to make this happen is to meet privately and make clear this is a conversation just between the two of you.

Begin by describing objectively the behavior that concerns you. Don't be judgmental or try to interpret what you've seen. Stick to facts and observations, rather than your personal opinions. Say "You seem easily upset recently," rather than a judgmental statement such as, "It bugs me how crabby you've been lately!"

Keep your description positive, rather than negative and accusatory. Objectively state the facts in a manner that other friends would agree to if asked their opinions.

The next part is to give your friend a chance to agree with or explain what you've observed. Make it an opportunity to discuss the issue.

Saying "You seem unhappy recently. Is anything wrong?" opens the door for discussion without positioning you as an authority who will make everything right. You may find that what you've reported is something your friend is unaware of, or that he or she has an explanation that eliminates your concerns.

If this "one-two" approach does have your friend verifying your concerns, you may find that simply talking things out may help fix the issue. Or there may be a bigger problem that requires professional help.

The key, however, is not to be confrontational. Give your friend encouragement and support, and be ready to assist in finding the needed help. With a positive approach you'll

help your friend and continue a strong friendship.

Counseling Corner" is provided by the American Counseling Association. Comments and questions to ACAcorner@counseling.org or visit the ACA website at www.counseling.org.

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