

# Keeping us going

How mental health problems affect friendship and how friends can support each other.



This booklet is for people who have a mental health problem and for their friends. It looks at the effect of mental health problems on friendship from both viewpoints and suggests ways that friends can support each other and keep their friendship going when times are tough.

In the booklet the issues affecting people experiencing mental distress sit side by side with information for their friends. Understanding how your friend may be feeling is an important part of being a good friend.



# Friendship and Mental health Problems

Our friendships are among the most valuable relationships we have. We meet our friends in different ways and we gain in various ways from different friendships. We may talk to friends in confidence about things we wouldn't discuss with our families. Our friends may annoy us, but they can also keep us going.

Friendship is a crucial element in protecting our mental health. We need to talk to our

friends and we want to listen when our friends want to talk to us. Our friends can keep us grounded and can help us get things in perspective. It is worth putting effort into maintaining our friendships and making new friends. Friends form one of the foundations of our ability to cope with the problems that life throws at us.

"The best thing my friend did for me was that they just accepted me as I was. They kept coming to see me even though I didn't seem to want them and they made me laugh."



## Friendship and Mental health Problems

When one of you has a mental health problem or is experiencing mental distress, it is important to try to keep friendships going, even though people with mental health problems often want to see their friends less than usual.

Friendship can play a key role in helping someone live with or recover from a mental health problem and overcome the isolation that often comes with it. It's natural to worry when a friend is troubled and most of us don't want to give up on a friend in distress, however difficult it may be to support them. Many people who do manage to keep their friendship going feel that it's stronger as a result.

This booklet is for people on both sides of a friendship. Bear in mind that whether or not you are in good mental health at the moment, this may well be different in the future. Many of us experience a mental health problem at some point, but a mental health problem doesn't have to mean that you're never able to support or laugh with someone else.

Friendship works both ways.

*"My friend helped me to get a grip on myself by making it clear it wasn't acceptable or safe for me to allow my condition to dominate my life."*





## **Ignorance, prejudice, discrimination: evidence from research**

- Many people have little accurate knowledge of mental health problems and may fear or avoid people who experience them.
- People with mental health problems often anticipate this rejection and impose on themselves a form of 'self-stigma', isolating themselves still further by withdrawing from social life.
- Other people's ignorance and prejudice lead to discrimination, blighting the lives of many people with mental health problems and making normal social life difficult.



## How does mental ill health affect friendship?

- People with more severe forms of mental illness have smaller social networks than others and have relatively more family members than friends in their social circle.
- People with smaller social networks, with fewer intimate relationships, find it more difficult to manage social situations.
- People with more long-lasting mental health problems often have relationships mainly with other people in the same position.





## The first hurdle: Choosing to tell a friend

Some people never make it past the first hurdle: talking about the fact that one of them is experiencing mental distress. If you have a mental health problem, you may feel ashamed of 'admitting' to it. You may feel that you are bothering your friend or fear being labelled.

You don't have to tell your friends – and you certainly don't have to tell everyone. There is no need to tell anyone about what you are experiencing in greater detail than you feel comfortable with. Some people find it helpful

to draw up a balance sheet of the short and long term pros and cons of telling or not telling people about their problem.

Tough as it can be, however, talking to close friends can be important for both of you. Even if you don't talk about it again, having the issue out in the open means that you don't have to worry about mentioning it by accident or 'explain away' medication or appointments. It may also make clear why you may be behaving in a particular way or why you don't want to go out or talk to them much.

“ I wanted my friends to know so they:  
... would cut me some slack if I behaved oddly  
... don't think I'm just ignoring them  
... could help me ”

## In your own words: Telling your friend

Pick a friend you trust as the first person you tell. Work out how to talk about your mental health problem in a way that will make it as easy as possible for both of you to avoid embarrassment. You may want to practise your opening sentence or you may want to play it by ear. Choose a time and a place where you will both feel comfortable. You may want to think about whether:

- the place is quiet or noisy, indoors or outside
- you are on your own or among other people, for instance in a pub or cafe
- you are doing an activity together, such as going for a walk, or just sitting down for a chat

You could phone or write to your friend, but if you do, try and talk to them face to face afterwards.

Some people react dramatically to news like this. Be ready for your friend to be shocked or not to take it in at first. Although mental health problems are common, this may be the first time they've heard someone talk about having one.

They may feel awkward and not know how to respond. This may be because they feel so worried about you or perhaps your news has struck a chord with something in their own life. They may even suggest that you're fine and just need to 'pull yourself together'.

Most people don't know very much about mental health issues so it may be a good idea to tell your friend about the problem itself, but don't overwhelm them. Take it one step at a time.







## Hearing my friend's problem: How do I respond?

If you're the friend of someone with a mental health problem, you may be concerned about them. The most important thing is to tell them that you're still their friend. If your friend is comfortable with being touched, a hug shows that you care about them and that you accept them whatever problems they are having.

*"My friend asked me questions, didn't just assume things, she really wanted to know"*

Take your cue from your friend. Are they comfortable with questions or would they rather talk about something else? Don't promise things you may not be able to deliver. How can you help them best?





## Keeping up your friendship: Day to day support

“My friends listened to me talk and talk and talk!”

After that first conversation, how can you keep your friendship going? What support can you offer to someone in mental distress?

“My friend realised I had taken an overdose and rang for an ambulance... but has never judged me or criticised my action.”

People with mental health problems often need different things from their friends at different times and friends show their support in different ways.

“They let me know I could call them whenever I needed to.”

If you're the friend, the most valuable support you can provide is often emotional support, just being there to talk and to listen. People really appreciate that their friends have made

time to contact them, visit them and invite them round. Mental health problems are so misunderstood that someone who acknowledges your problem, continues to accept you and treats you with compassion is doing something extremely important to aid your recovery.

“My friend phoned me, talked to me about normal stuff, sent me letters, took me out sometimes.”

Your friend isn't looking for another mental health professional and should expect nothing more than your affection and your support as a friend. Some people with mental health problems want to go on being as 'normal' as possible with their friends and that may mean continuing to laugh and have fun together. They don't want to be identified by their problem, even if you need to adapt some of the activities you used to do together.

“I didn’t know how often to ask ‘how she was’ (especially in front of other people).”

However, someone who insists that they’re ‘fine’ may actually be in a pretty bad way. They may just need to talk or they may need professional help. Men are often particularly reluctant to talk about emotional issues.

Practical help can be valuable, too. Tasks like cleaning, shopping and basic household admin can seem impossible to someone who is having a difficult time. Many people really appreciate friends who help them manage their finances or take them to appointments – or indeed just take them out. Another form of practical help is by tracking down information – for example about therapies, organisations and services.

If you feel more comfortable offering practical help than emotional support, explain this to your friend. It is important that you acknowledge their distress, even if you don’t talk about it much.

## How it is: Understanding your limits

If you’re miserable, suicidal, confused or having mood swings, you’re not likely to be your ‘usual self’. It’s intensely frustrating – for you, and for everyone around you – to realise that you don’t feel up to doing the things you used to take for granted such as going to work, seeing your friends, getting exercise or playing with your children. If you can’t go out - or you can’t get out of bed - you become increasingly isolated and perhaps hard to deal with. And if you show other symptoms like hearing voices or feeling convinced that someone is doing you down, it’s hard for you to talk to other people and it’s very hard for them to talk to you.

“I gave my friend a lot of support and at times felt close to burning out. Now that my friend has recovered we are closer than before. However, I worry that I might not be able to cope with another episode.”



Friends who do hang on in there can feel out of their depth, frustrated or emotionally drained. You may feel that the person you used to know has changed and so has the balance of who needs whom in the friendship.

“It is difficult to manage the friendship so it still feels balanced.”

Some people reach the point where, instead of being a friend, they feel they've become more of a carer. You may feel responsible for your friend and worry about what would happen if you weren't around. It can be painful and embarrassing – on both sides – to admit that this is happening and it can be hard to get the balance back, even if your friend's mental health improves. But you don't need to cope alone and setting clear limits to the support you can give is not the same as rejecting your friend.

## How can I support my friend?

- Find out about your friend's mental health problem and the support available for them.
- Get support yourself - talk to another friend, enlist the support of mutual friends if the friend you are supporting gives you the go-ahead or call Samaritans or a helpline.
- Look after your own physical and mental wellbeing and take time off from supporting your friend.





# Friendships change

*“She has just been diagnosed as being bi-polar. When she drinks she gets very upset and angry so we rarely invite her to join us when alcohol is involved. I also make more of an effort to listen.”*

Friendships change and sometimes they fade away or end abruptly. You may want to take time to reflect on each of your friendships and what they offer you.

You are an active partner in your friendships. If a friendship is not beneficial to both of you, you have the power to negotiate changes to the activities you have always done together. On some occasions, you may decide that it's best for a friendship to end.

If a friend no longer contacts you, it's understandable to feel rejected, but you are not responsible for other people's reaction to your problems. If one person ends your friendship, it doesn't mean that others will do the same.

If you are the friend of someone experiencing mental health problems who seems to be withdrawing from

your friendship, try to understand what your friend may be going through. Their difficulties may be only temporary. Give them the space they need and make sure they know how they can contact you at a later date if they decide to get back in touch.

## What else can I do?

There is no substitute for rewarding relationships, but some people with mental health problems don't want to turn to their friends. Others find that their friends just don't want to listen and others want back-up in order to avoid putting too much pressure on their friendships.

*“I prefer my friends to be a distraction from my mental health problems.”*

Support groups are often useful. However little you may have in common with everyone else in the room, you know that you all share one thing.

In the same way, if you're up to going out and about you may enjoy joining a group centred around an activity: a book group, a chess club or an exercise class. Research has shown that exercise plays an important part in mental health, whether you do it on your own or with other people.

If you don't want to join a group, try going to places where there are lots of people. Like some libraries, leisure centres usually have cafés. You don't have to talk to other people if you don't want to, but will be in their company while you sit with a drink and a newspaper for a while.

If you've got internet access, online communities can also be supportive even if they're not focused around mental health problems. If you're taking part in a conversation about something outside the mental health field (like cars, music or sci-fi), it can be reassuring to know that this is an arena where nobody knows anything about your personal life.

## Sticking with your friendship

If you have a mental health problem and you're worried that you're making too many demands on your friend, one of the most important things you can do is thank them. Make it clear – in words or actions – that you appreciate what they are doing for you.

*“It was hard for several years but now the friendship is stronger than ever.”*

Your friendship may change for a while or it may change permanently. However, it doesn't have to vanish. Nor does it have to take over your life. Underneath everything that is going on, you're still the people who became friends in the first place. We all have our ups and downs and need the support of our friends. Friendship is worth sticking with.





## Mental Health First Aid

- Five steps to help people with mental health problems
- Assess risk of suicide or self-harm
- Listen non-judgmentally
- Give reassurance and information
- Encourage person to get appropriate professional help
- Encourage self-help strategies.

From Scotland's Mental Health First Aid project

## Unsure what to do?

### Common questions to help support your friend

As the friend of someone experiencing a mental health problem, there may be times when you are unsure how to respond to a situation or to something your friend says. You will know best what will work in your friendship. The guidance below offers suggestions for ways to deal with common situations, but is not comprehensive.

Q. Should I get my friend to go out even if they are reluctant?

A. Many people with mental health problems withdraw from life. As a friend, you can encourage them to get out as they may benefit from the change of scenery as well as from the exercise. Don't be too ambitious in what you suggest. Walk only a short way if your friend is hesitant – to the corner shop or to post a letter.

If your friend doesn't want to go out, don't force them. They may already feel they have lost control of their life. Respect their right to choose what to do and tell them that your offer is always open if they change their mind.

Q. How should I respond if my friend says they are hearing voices or seeing things?

A. Hearing, seeing, smelling or believing things that no-one else does or reading personal significance into everyday experiences can be frightening. Seeing your friend affected like this can be disturbing for you and make you feel confused and powerless to help.

Your friend's experience will seem real to them so it is not helpful to ignore their thoughts or beliefs. Tread carefully and have respect for what your friend tells you.



You may never have heard voices, for instance, so you don't know what it's like. Don't reinforce or dismiss their experiences, but show that you care about how they are making your friend feel.

If you notice that your friend is not their usual self, it may be helpful to challenge them gently at the point when they seem to be withdrawing into their own world. If there are strategies that help your friend relax or distract them, encourage them in these activities. Do not continue challenging them if they are distressed or are not responding to you. A change of environment or perspective may help your friend reconnect with daily life.

**Q. If I think my friend's drinking or drug use is becoming a problem, should I say so?**

**A.** Making comments about someone's drinking or drug use could be seen by your friend as judging them so it is important to tell them that you are raising the issue because you care about them.

Tell your friend what you have noticed about their drinking or drug use and point out any consequences that you have noticed such as not turning up to events or not remembering what happened the night before. Explain

that you are worried about them. You could ask them how they are feeling or if they are having a hard time.

Reassure your friend that there are actions they can take to reduce their drinking or drug use and find other ways of coping. You could help them find out about local services and encourage them in any self-help strategies they learn such as keeping a diary of what they drink and how they are feeling.

**Q. What do I do if my friend says they are feeling suicidal or can't go on or if I suspect they are thinking about taking their own life?**

**A.** Ask your friend how they are feeling and let them know that you are available to listen. Talking can be a great help to someone who is feeling suicidal.

Encourage your friend to get help as they need more support than you alone can give. They could talk to other friends and family, health services or Samaritans.

Your friend can call Samaritans at any time on **08457 90 90 90** for the cost of a local call. You could call them, too, to get support yourself. Samaritans may be able to contact the person you are worried about

themselves. Callers are anonymous and conversations remain confidential.

Q. What should I do if my friend becomes violent?

A. The link between violence and mental health problems is not strong and people with mental health problems are more likely to be the victims of violence than to be violent themselves. People with mental health problems are also more likely to harm themselves than to harm other people.

If, exceptionally, your friend does become violent, your response will depend on where you are and whether you are with other people. Your first priority is to make yourself safe by going elsewhere. You could leave your friend to calm down for a while before you check they are ok.

Don't fight back. It is better to be assertive than aggressive. Talk to your friend about the incident, make them aware of its effect on you and say that violence makes it hard for you to support them. While this can be hard, remember the person you are talking to is still the friend you care about.

Q. Can I tell health services how unwell my friend is if they do not seek help themselves?

A. Yes, but first try to tell your friend how worried about them you are. Telling your friend that you have noticed they are troubled shows that you care and gives them the opportunity to talk to you about how they are feeling. Encourage them to get help themselves. You could offer to find out what help is available and travel with them to an appointment.

Explain to your friend why you are going to tell someone that you trust about their distress. Your friend's GP is usually a good starting point because GPs act as a gateway to other services. You could also tell someone who is close to your friend as they may want to help as well.

Making the decision to tell a third party about your friend's troubles may be tough. You can get support by calling Samaritans. Tell your friend you are doing this and leave them the Samaritans' details, too.

## National organisations offering information and support

### Mental Health Foundation

The Mental Health Foundation provides information, undertakes research, campaigns and works to improve services for people affected by mental health problems.

- Visit [www.mentalhealth.org.uk/campaigns](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/campaigns) for research findings and resources on friendship
- Visit [www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/publications) for a wide range of other publications on mental health

Call **020 7803 1100** or email [mhf@mhf.org.uk](mailto:mhf@mhf.org.uk) to order further copies of this booklet and other publications

### Samaritans

Samaritans provides emotional support for people who are experiencing feelings of distress or despair, including those which may lead to suicide.

- For confidential emotional support, call **08457 90 90 90** (local rate) 24 hours a day or email [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)
- Visit [www.samaritans.org.uk](http://www.samaritans.org.uk) to read Worried about others in the Information section

### Mind

Mind provides information and support on mental health issues, campaigns to improve policy and attitudes and develops services with local Mind associations (LMAs)

- For confidential information on mental health issues, call MindinfoLine **0845 766 0163** (local rate) Monday to Friday 9.15am to 5.15pm or email [info@mind.org.uk](mailto:info@mind.org.uk)
- Visit [www.mind.org.uk](http://www.mind.org.uk) to read Mind's publications How to cope as a carer and How to cope with loneliness or to find your nearest LMA

### Scottish Association for Mental Health (SAMH)

SAMH provides services to people who experience mental health problems and campaigns to influence policy and improve care services in Scotland.

- For general mental health enquiries and advice on legal and benefits issues, call **0141 568 7000** or email [info@samh.org.uk](mailto:info@samh.org.uk)
- Visit [www.samh.org.uk](http://www.samh.org.uk) to read Mental Distress: How to help in the Publications section

### Scotland's Mental Health First Aid

A project to raise awareness about the need for good mental health and wellbeing among the general public

- For details of training in mental health first aid, visit [www.healthscotland.org.uk/smhfa](http://www.healthscotland.org.uk/smhfa) call **0131 537 4753** or email [smhfa@health.scot.nhs.uk](mailto:smhfa@health.scot.nhs.uk)

### Together

Together runs mental health services and campaigns, does research and educates local communities about their own mental health needs.

- Visit [www.together-uk.org](http://www.together-uk.org) for information on its services for carers or call **020 7780 7300** to find out more

## Organisations supporting carers

### Carers UK

Carers UK campaigns for change on behalf of carers and provides information and advice to carers.

- For advice on rights, benefits and services, call CarersLine on **0808 808 7777** 10am to 12pm and 2pm to 4pm Wednesdays and Thursdays only
- Visit [www.carersonline.org.uk](http://www.carersonline.org.uk)

### Princess Royal Trust for Carers

The Princess Royal Trust for Carers provides carers' support services throughout the UK as well as information and advice for carers.

- For details of Princess Royal Trust Carers' Centres and Mental Health Factsheets for carers, visit [www.carers.org](http://www.carers.org)

### Local services

- Visit [www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk) to find health services in your area
- Visit [www.mentalhealth.org.uk/information/organisations-and-websites](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/information/organisations-and-websites) to find organisations working in mental health in your area
- Visit [www.direct.gov.uk](http://www.direct.gov.uk) for links to the website of your local council. Your council has information on services, faith groups, community groups, clubs and leisure activities

# The Mental Health Foundation

Founded in 1949, the Mental Health Foundation is the leading UK charity working in mental health and learning disabilities.

We are unique in the way we work. We bring together teams that undertake research, develop services, design training, influence policy and raise public awareness within one organisation. We are keen to tackle difficult issues and try different approaches, many of them led by service users themselves. We use our findings to promote survival, recovery and prevention. We do this by working with statutory and voluntary organisations, from GP practices to primary schools. We enable them to provide better help for people with mental health problems or learning disabilities, and promote mental well-being.

We also work to influence policy, including Government at the highest levels. We use our knowledge to raise awareness and to help tackle stigma attached to mental illness and learning disabilities. We reach millions of people every year through our media work, information booklets and online services. We can only continue our work with the support of many individuals, charitable trusts and companies - 83% of our income comes from voluntary sources.

Visit [www.mentalhealth.org.uk](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk) to find out more about our work.

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The booklet is also available to read online at [www.mentalhealth.org.uk](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk)

If you have found this publication useful and would like to make a donation, please contact us on **020 7803 1121** or visit [www.mentalhealth.org.uk/get-involved](http://www.mentalhealth.org.uk/get-involved)

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