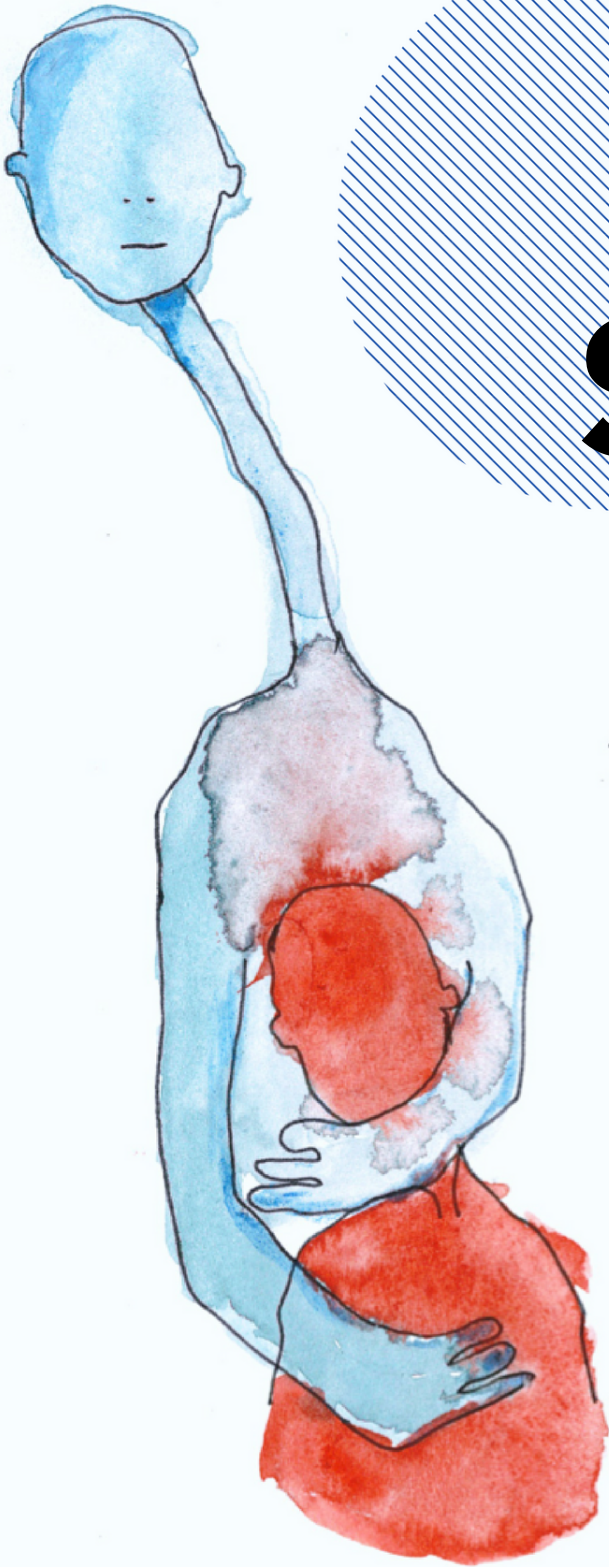


How to Support your Friends



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Thanks

Thanks to those who have contributed to and inspired this guide.

Thanks to the friends I have supported and been supported by, for inspiring this guide and teaching me valuable skills. As well as experience supporting friends and observing others supporting friends on online support spaces, the foundations of this guide also come from the Student Minds 'Look After Your Mate' resources, the Students' Unions' Advice Service training, and many of The Mighty's articles (thank you all for existing). A final thanks is necessary for the students who attended my 'Supporting Your Friends' workshop in April 2017, for being both an engaged group and highlighting areas that needed clarification in this guide. This guide is dedicated to all of you – friends, services and students.

Foreword

If you have any queries about this guide, please email welfare@cusu.cam.ac.uk. See www.cusu.co.uk/supporting-you/welfare/supporting-your-friends for a hyperlinked PDF.

It's likely your friends will require support, at some point.

It's likely your friends, at various points and to varying extents, will require support in some form or another: Cambridge is stressful in itself, and more so if there are other factors at play. According to the Big Cambridge Survey 2016, around half of respondents said that dealing with stress¹ and anxiety was a problem in their Cambridge-student life, a figure that was higher for students who were LGBT, disabled, women or non-binary, among others. While mental health is the ultimate focus of this guide, it's important to note that many things can impact on mental health: discrimination, harassment, relationship issues, financial difficulties, and other health problems.

College welfare officers are not always best placed to support fellow students.

The CUSU-GU Welfare and Rights Officer trains JCR and MCR Officers in Welfare Roles in the skills required for supporting fellow students, such as active listening skills and knowledge of the support services available. However, few students tend to come to these officers, and their role predominantly ends up being political and/or involving welfare-event organising. This is no bad thing, as they wouldn't be able to simultaneously support many students, and it is important they put much of their little time into long-term political change to reduce difficulties arising, where possible. Moreover, students may be going directly to services, like their tutor and the Students' Unions' Advice Service. However, it is likely that some students are also turning to (untrained) friends, or not seeking support at all.

Friends often seek support from each other.

Indeed, for struggling students, friends are often the frontline of mental health support: they are both likely to be most often around - and feel most comfortable talking to - their friends. According to NUS research², 58% of students who experienced mental distress told their friends - compared to 45% telling family, 15% their GP and only 10% a counsellor. While this data is not Cambridge-specific, it reflects the high likelihood of friends telling each other about mental distress they're experiencing.

Therefore, this guide is to prepare you for the likely case of supporting your friends.

Therefore, it's good to be prepared in case your friend does approach you with, or appears to be struggling with, any issues. Hopefully, unlike with 'Peer Support', they will do the same for you. This guide is developed from Student Minds' 'Look After Your Mate'³ and the training provided to College Welfare Officers. It looks at the ways in which you can support your friends over time: from being an effective listener to small acts to remind them you care, and support services available to them (and you). While it's great you care about your friends and want to support them as best as possible, make sure you're practicing self-care and getting support too, so you don't feel overburdened in the process.

1 Note that stress is not a mental health problem per-se, as it's an adaptive response to an issue. However, if prolonged, elevated and/or inappropriate, it may develop into a mental health problem.

2 www.theguardian.com/education/2014/may/10/students-how-to-help-a-friend-with-mental-health-illness

3 www.studentminds.org.uk/uploads/3/7/8/4/3784584/interactive_laym_guide.pdf

Other useful resources

- **The Mental Health Foundation on 'Friendship and Mental Health'**
www.mentalhealth.org.uk/a-to-z/f/friendship-and-mental-health#accordion-content-123-0
- **The 'helping someone else' sections on Mind:**
www.mind.org.uk/information-support/helping-someone-else
- **CUSU's list of Mental Health Support Options:**
www.cusu.co.uk/supporting-you/welfare/mental-health-support-options
- **CUSU Mental Health Awareness Week blog posts:** www.disabled.cusu.cam.ac.uk/mhaw17/
- **The Students' Unions' Advice Service:** www.studentadvice.cam.ac.uk

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General points

Listening is more important than talking.

Being able to listen is much more important than what you know. By listening you provide your friends with the **support to making coping with things easier**. And, through listening, you will **learn** about your friends' experiences and how you can support them. It matters much less about how much you understand or what you say, what know about support services or whether you are able to find solutions. Anything you do know may be helpful, but listening is the most important thing.

Have confidence in your abilities.

While you don't know everything about your friends, **you know them better than most people and they trust you**. This gives you a valuable role, and one different from counsellors, their tutor or other professionals. It's ok not to understand everything, know exactly what to say or how to help. Just by listening to your friend(s) and **validating** and **reassuring** them, you're doing something important, particularly as talking about sensitive subjects can feel so embarrassing or shameful or upsetting that that they might avoid talking about them altogether.

There is no absolutely right way of doing things.

This guide is *not* a rulebook. It aims to build on your existing expertise, helping you feel more confident in knowing how to support your friends (particularly in difficult situations), by providing **guidance** and **suggestions**. Ultimately though, **you're the expert** on knowing what works for you and your friends: and the more supporting you do, the more you'll refine this knowledge.

Build friends up rather than knock them down – use humour wisely.

Be careful of "banter". While making jokes *with* people can be important social bonding, frequently **making fun of someone is often isolating**, and tolerated rather than appreciated. In a world of **oppressions** and other stressors, people really need their friends to build them back up, not tear them down further. Make sure you're building your friends up and they're doing the same to you! Used positively though, **humour** can be a powerful **coping mechanism**, and a **useful easer** on talking about difficult -often-stigmatised - topics more comfortably. For example, some men may find humour particularly useful for talking about their mental health with each other (*see next point*).

Remember yourself.

Creating boundaries, seeking support for supporting and self-care will all be returned to later (p.10-11), but it is important to bear in mind all the while through reading this guide that **it's great you're supporting your friends, but remember to look after yourself too**. Emotional labour, while important, is very exhausting (and undervalued in it's ability to be so). Make sure you're **getting some support back**, both (in the long-run) from friends you're supporting as well as from others. Even if your friends' problems are 'worse', this does not negate your need for support - from someone. **You are important**.

Starting conversation

Check-in with how friends are feeling.

Doing so regularly, and encouraging a response beyond “*fine, thanks*” where possible, is a good way to give each of you the **opportunity to talk about anything bothering you** and **prevent things from building up**. While there may not always be something to talk about, frequently checking in fosters a **culture of being there to listen** to each other, so it makes it **feel easier to approach each other when struggling**. It’s particularly important to check-in if you haven’t seen a friend in a while, and even if they appear to be managing fine (**outward appearances don’t tell the full story**). **Alternatives to messaging** include sending a letter (the CUSU Mail Service is free), calling or Skyping, as well as obviously seeing each other in real life.

Probe if things don’t seem okay, to try to start a conversation.

For example, **if they say they’re stressed, ask them about it** (“*How come? Do you want to talk?*”), or otherwise encourage them to expand on that they said (“*Mm...*”; “*Yeah?*”). **If they’re alluding to something, ask them to clarify** (“*What do you mean by that?*”; “*Why do you say that?*”), keeping the tone non-judgmental and encouraging. If you’ve noticed **they’ve been acting differently** - perhaps getting unusually upset or angry, losing weight or avoiding things - **ask them about it**: “*I’ve noticed that [...] Is everything ok?*” Signs of struggling will be **relative** for each individual, and it may be **subtler** for some than others. Finally, if you hear something *about* a close friend, you might want to approach your friend and **check they’re ok**, reminding them that you’re there if you want to talk, perhaps mentioning what you heard. Be sure to make your probing **concern- rather than curiosity-motivated**. If you don’t feel close enough friends to probe, you could mention your worries to one of their closer friends.

Respect if they don’t want to talk to you right now.

You’ve **done something useful** even just by asking if they want to talk, as doing so provides a **sense of support**. Let them know that they **can come back to you** if they change their mind. You could suggest they **write things down** (a letter or message) if that helps them to explain first off. Remember to **keep checking-in** to give them (and yourself) opportunities to talk.

Having conversation

Be an active listener.

The principles of active listening can be very beneficial when speaking with friends. Active listening means being **warm** and **attentive**, and **not making assumptions or judgments**. It’s about listening, and helping your friend **explore their options** (if they want), rather than bombarding them with advice or your own experiences. Talking, and feeling listened to, alone can really **help organise thoughts** and make problems feel more manageable. The better at listening you are, the **easier to talk** your friend will find it, and so the **more comfortable with seeking support** they’ll be!

The rest of the points in this section will develop further on what it means to actively listen.

Validate your friends' experiences; don't dismiss them, however seemingly small.

If a friend has brought something up, it's significant enough. Seemingly small things can **accumulate and transform into larger problems**. It's important to **validate experiences**, however small or long ago, as **difficult, real and worthy of support**, and listen to your friend's perspective. While perspective can be useful, telling friends that they're "*making a fuss*", that things "*could be worse*", or that they need to "*come on*", is unhelpful and likely to worsen problems, dismissing their need for support. This is particularly important if incidents relate to race, gender, class, sexuality or any disabilities, as seemingly small incidents can be part of a wider picture of structural oppression and inequality that is cumulatively draining and frustrating. If, on the other hand, your friend is dismissing your (or another's) experiences, **don't sacrifice your own wellbeing**: make them aware (e.g. "*You do need to recognise though that...*").

Acknowledge negatives before positives.

If you want to highlight a positive, rather than saying "*look on the bright side*", which could appear dismissive, try something more like "*That sounds awful/frustrating/upsetting. I'm really sorry you had (or have) to go through that... at least there's the small silver lining that...?*" To **avoid erasing their struggling**, make sure to **acknowledge the issues they've raised**, before looking at a potential bright side. That's not to say some humour, like appreciating a **situation's irony**, or talking (briefly) about some **unrelated good news**, isn't useful, particularly after intense conversation. The appropriateness of making jokes or discussing positives depends on the situation, timing, and your and your friend's sense of humour. If there are no positives, you could highlight how they don't have to go through this alone.

Be aware of non-verbal communication.

Non-verbal communication is often important in **helping your friend feel accepted and listened to**, and thus more able to discuss sensitive personal issues. Examples include the following:

- **Nodding**
- **Making sounds of encouragement** (e.g. mmm)
- **Having an open posture and facing your friend** (unless they want otherwise)
- **Making (some) eye contact**, if it feels comfortable for you and your friend (it may not)
- **Avoiding distractions** (e.g. being on your phone); if you find fiddling with something (e.g. a hairband) helps you concentrate, try to do so non-obviously
- **Tone of voice** (e.g. being non-judgmental and warm, rather than shocked and defensive)

Remain (as) calm (as possible)

It's expected to be distressing to hear your friends struggling, but becoming very obviously stressed yourself will likely **make your friend feel worse**, by suggesting the **problem is even bigger** than they thought and/or **unsolvable**. Moreover, calm reflection, aided by giving yourself time to breathe and think, **prevents impulsive actions** that are likely to be worse in the long-term. Remaining calm doesn't mean just saying "*It will be fine*", which can be quite dismissive and doesn't really address the problem(s); rather, it means saying something more like "*It will be ok because ... we're going to work out how to deal with this*" or "*it's an awful situation but you don't have to go through it alone*".

Allow them to cry, and provide comfort (if desired)

If your friend appears upset, and perhaps even starts crying, it's ok to be silent and let them cry, and just be present non-judgmentally. You **don't need to fill the silence** or feel embarrassed about it; they'll likely feel more embarrassed than you and you might want to reassure them that **"it's ok" to cry**. You could also offer to **comfort them** (e.g. *"Would you like a hug?"*). It's important to **ask**, rather than just do, as, like with eye contact, not everyone finds physical touch helpful or comforting. You'll likely already know the best way to comfort your friend, but **don't assume**; also take note of what feels comfortable for you.

Share similar experiences (where relevant) but don't make them the focus.

Expressing similar experiences can be **very powerful in eliciting solidarity** and making people **feel less alone** in struggling, if you want to do so. However, **avoid letting your experiences overshadow theirs** in the conversation - your issues can be the focus afterwards or another time - unless, of course, you're finding their experiences invalidating of yours (note privilege within the conversation context). **Avoid relaying experiences competitively in an "I've experienced worse than you" way**: not everyone is affected by the same things in the same way, and experiences interact with one another. Try and focus on how each of your experiences are/were bad and deserve support, rather than positing them against each other: **be supportive rather than competitive**. Finally, recognise that having similar experience(s) does not mean you know exactly how your friend feels, as **reactions differ**. So, when relaying your own experiences, make sure to do so with the caveat that you recognise this **doesn't mean you completely understand their experience**, and are there to **listen more** if they want to tell you more about it, perhaps prompting with questions. By listening you will best understand them, and they will feel best understood. If you are finding listening stressful because you **relate too much** to their experiences, it is fine to highlight this and that, though you care, someone else will be better suited for listening.

Summarise and reflect back to clarify what's being said.

Summarise what your friend is saying and **reflect** it back to them (e.g. *"So, what I understand is that...?"*) to check you understand or and **clarify misunderstandings**. This also serves to show your friend **you're listening** and to encourage them to **continue talking**, as well as helping them to **structure their thoughts** (e.g. seeing the bigger picture). Where possible, use phrases they've said themselves, and make sure to keep your tone **non-judgemental and tentative**, so as not to impose your understanding. It's ok to suggest interpretations, e.g. using phrases like *"So it's almost as if..."*, but just make sure you **ask whether or not you've understood correctly**. Your friend **may disagree with, or correct, your summary** or what they'd initially said (e.g. *"Actually I'm not worried about that. The issue is more ..."*); this is **to be welcomed**, as it clears up misunderstandings and can help to clarify their thoughts.

Ask relevant questions (ideally openly phrased).

While listening alone is the most important aspect of active listening, asking relevant questions can also be **important for demonstrating engagement, checking understanding and spurring new understandings**. Where possible, choose **open questions** (e.g. “How did it make you feel?”), rather than closed (e.g. yes-no-answer) questions (e.g. “Did it make you feel sad?”). **Closed questions often make assumptions and implicit judgments** about how someone should feel or act in a situation, subsequently limiting answers and the subsequent conversation direction; due to their judgmental nature, they can also feel quite aggressive. In contrast, **open questions feel much gentler and allow a wider range of responses**, so should be used unless a closed question is necessary. It’s ok though if you can’t think of how to phrase a question openly in the moment, or think a closed question would be better (said with the right tone, they can have a similar effect). The most important thing is listening!

Questions you could ask include the following:

- *When did this happen / How long has this been going on for?*
- *Has this happened before?*
- *What do you want the outcome to be (e.g. of raising a complaint)?*
- *Can you pinpoint what is specifically worrying you about the situation?*
- *What makes you say that? / Why do you think that?*
- *How do you (/did you) feel about that?*
- *Have you spoken to anyone else about this (e.g. your GP/tutor/DoS/the nurse or counsellor/ the UCS/DRC/SUAS / your family)? Would you be able to?*
- *What options do you have? Can we talk through them?*
- *Have you thought about what to do about this? I can help you think?*
- *Have you done anything before that’s helped in similar situations?*
- *Is there anything I can do? Note: see section on providing practical help, p.11*

Follow leads. (CN: suicidal thoughts)

Sometimes people start talking about one issue and then **mention another, perhaps more serious, issue in passing**. This may be only after they’ve sussed how you’ve reacted to smaller things, or when they’ve got into the details of an issue. It’s important to **pick up on these leads and see if your friend wants to talk** about them e.g. “You mentioned ... Do you want to talk about that?” If they don’t, that’s fine - just check to be sure. It’s particularly **important to pick up on leads suggesting giving up** (e.g. “I just can’t do it any more” / “It’s not worth it” / “I just give up”), as, while they might refer to something else (e.g. work; if so, direct them to their tutor), these could be concealed indications at **suicidal thoughts**. Ask your friend exactly what they mean; if the latter is the case, listen to how they feel and trying to refute any feelings of worthlessness they have by highlighting how important they are to you.*

* **On suicidal thoughts.** For mental health support options, see this page: www.cusu.co.uk/supporting-you/welfare/mental-health-support-options. For information on emergencies, see p.16 of this guide. For specific information on supporting others with suicidal thoughts, see this Mind resource: www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/supporting-someone-who-feels-suicidal/about-suicidal-feelings/#.WQEDeiMrJhE. **NOTE:** If **you** are experiencing, or have experienced, suicidal thoughts, take extra care; recognise that you might not be the best person to support your friend on this, even if you feel you are the most experienced. Prioritise your wellbeing.

Before you give advice and/or opinions, check if they're wanted.

As friends it can be appropriate for you to **give your own advice or opinions**. You're really one of the only people in a **position to tell your friend what you think** (professionals must often be non-directive). While you should avoid jumping to conclusions or imposing your ideas on friends, you **can be really important** in telling them what they need to hear. That said, if your friend disagrees, recognise that they need to come to their own conclusions themselves, and that while sometimes your opinions and perspectives can be useful, **sometimes they're unwanted and overwhelming**. It's a good idea to **check with your friend** whether they want your opinion/advice or not first though (*e.g. "I can't decide for you what to do, but do you want my opinion?"*), before presuming and bombarding them with unsolicited - and perhaps overwhelming - opinions and advice. Sometimes a **listening ear** and a **source of validation and reassurance** is all that's wanted, and you don't need to think up advice or solutions.

Move forward: focus on what your friend can do, not what they should have done.

If wanted and you feel comfortable doing so, **discuss the options your friend currently has available** and how to manage similar situations in the future. It's unhelpful, and can come across as **blaming** them, to tell them what they **should have** or **shouldn't have** done. Not only do **people react differently in stressful situations**, but sometimes they also aren't aware there is a problem at the time. What's important is that they're seeking support now. If appropriate, you could explicitly state that **things weren't their fault**. With regards the options your friend has available, find a **list of the support services and resources** (listed according to key services and by situation) from p.15 of this guide that may help. Remember that your friend may not want to take further steps immediately, but also bear in mind the **limitations on the support you can provide** (due to time, energy and expertise). Remember that you probably **won't be able to (and nor are expected to) solve all your friend's problems** yourself – so try not to feel frustrated or guilty if you can't. As has been repeated many times already, **being there to listen is the most important thing**, and being so even after they've sought further support.

End the conversation properly - not abruptly.

It's up to you how to end a conversation, but it's important to make the **conversation feel like it has some closure** rather than ending abruptly and possibly stressfully. If you know you're going to have to rush off somewhere, **give your friend a time warning**. If you like you could say something **to lighten the mood** at the end of a conversation (about something unrelated but relevant), particularly if the conversation has been very stressful and intense. You may also want to decide what the **action points** will be (if there were any), making sure not to pressure your friend into doing anything just yet if they don't want to. Action points may include **services they plan to contact** (see previous point), or **something nice you'll do together soon** - e.g. visit the Botanic Gardens or watch a film - and when.

Respect your friend's privacy, but sharing some information may be necessary.

While you're not bound by service confidentiality policies, it's important to **respect your friend** and **not recklessly share information** they've told you. Remember that what's insignificant to you might not necessarily be so to your friend: **err on the side of caution** with what they'd feel comfortable sharing and whom they'd feel comfortable knowing, particularly with mutual friends. If anyone quizzes you, you can always say **something brief** like "*going through some things*", rather than giving specific details, **unless any are particularly necessary**. Make sure sharing information is **concern- rather than curiosity-motivated**. You can also **seek support and advice yourself** about supporting your friend. Some **people you could seek advice from regarding** your friend include the porters, your tutor or the Students' Unions' Advice Service, and, where relevant, a common-room officer.

After conversation: Self-care and boundaries

Seek support when supporting, for your own wellbeing.

Remember that even professional counsellors and advice-givers **share things** within their service: keeping everything to yourself can be **very stressful** and **burdensome** and is not recommended. Support when supporting is *essential* so as **to maintain your own wellbeing**. Maintaining your wellbeing is important in itself (and should be valued above all else), but also it is no use to your friend either if your wellbeing becomes so damaged you can't support them either. Support could be low-level, perhaps offloading things onto **other friends** when you catch up with them, or higher level, like speaking to a **counsellor**, if you needed greater professional expertise.

Places you could seek support yourself include the following:

- Mutual friends (if they understand the issue and this feels appropriate)
- Non-mutual friends (keep things hypothetical/anonymous)
- Your family members
- Your tutor
- Porters
- College nurse and/or counsellor
- Chaplain
- Students' Unions' Advice Service
- Listening lines, like Nightline or Samaritans
- See a summary here: www.cusu.co.uk/supporting-you/welfare/mental-health-support-options

Have clear boundaries, to protect you and your friend.

Boundaries define **what is and is not appropriate** in a relationship (here, friendship), and vary from friendship to friendship depending on **people's personal boundaries**. Clear boundaries are important so that you **both understand the nature of the relationship**. This **protects** both your friend (by managing their expectations, e.g. when they can seek support, how much and of what kind) and yourself (so you're not overburdened, your personal life is not infringed upon, and you do not overstep your role).

Recognise that you have your own commitments and problems too.

Much advice on supporting others says things like let your friends know you are *always* there for them and they can get in touch *whenever*. While this is great in an **ideal world** and you'd love to be there 24/7, it's likely you'll have **your own commitments and problems too** so there may be some **limitations** in practice. If you're finding it overwhelming how often a friend is contacting you for support, it can be good to arrange **regular** meet-ups, Skype or message sessions, or equivalent, so they have **more defined times** when they know they can talk to you, and you know you'll be free. If you ideally don't want to receive messages after a certain time of night, it's also **completely reasonable** to say so. Though it will vary according to the urgency of the situation, **being busy or stressed is** a valid reason to **prioritise yourself** but **do not just ignore friends' requests for support**, as this can exacerbate any feelings of worthlessness or loneliness they may have. If you can't talk right that moment, **say so** - as soon as possible. **Let them know you care**, and **when you will be available** to talk instead.

Encourage friends to seek further support when necessary.

Though a sensitive subject and a topic to be raised carefully, if you feel your friend is becoming **too reliant** on you, you find their **issue particularly triggering**, and/or you are **out-of-your-depth** supporting them, it's definitely worth highlighting that you're not able (**time-, energy- and/or expertise-wise**) to give the support they need. You should say that while you'll still be here to **support them as a friend**, you also think they **need to access professional support**, e.g. from their college tutor or nurse, their GP or the University Counselling Service, to name a few. **Talk through with them** the process of accessing services and any reservations they might have, helping them to contact the service if desired. Don't impose one solution on them, but do continue to **reiterate boundaries evermore firmly** if you are becoming increasingly overwhelmed and your friend refuses to seek support elsewhere. It's very important to consider your own wellbeing as well as friends'. **You are the only one that can put YOU first and are aware of YOUR limits**. Moreover, the more overwhelmed you become, the less able you will be able to support friends and the more support you'll also need. You could talk to far-removed friends or family, your tutor or SUAS for support, if you're having trouble encouraging your friend to seek further support.

Providing practical help

In addition to being there to listen and giving reminders that you care, you can also provide close friends with more practical action-focused help and reminders. This may be particularly welcomed if a friend is struggling to otherwise do things. Friends may feel like a burden, so if you do offer to help with something (you don't have to), **stress that is not a problem to do so**; if they adamantly say no though, **respect** that.

Where possible, provide action-focused help that facilitates your friend to act

This starts by asking how you can help: *"Is there anything I can do? Would you like me to [...] - would that be helpful?"* (See next page for suggestions of things you could offer.)

Things you could offer to do that may be helpful include the following:

- Helping them get groceries, e.g. make a joint trip to Sainsbury's
- Picking up something they need while you're out
- Helping them construct an email to their supervisor, e.g. if they need an extension on their essay deadline or to delay a supervision
- Walking with them if it's their first time getting out in a while
- Discussing with them where they could get further support (see end of this guide)
- Helping them make a GP appointment (sit with them while they ring)
- Accompanying them to the GP or Addenbrooke's
- Helping them access other support services like the UCS, e.g. by getting up the self-referral form link for them and sitting with them while they fill it in
- Returning books to the library for them if they have lots that are overdue

Facilitate friends doing things themselves: provide reminders to self-care.

Facilitating friends to help themselves is an important, more indirect and less time-consuming way of providing assistance. It means you can be helpful without doing things *for* your friends. Some things you can't do for your friends, and it's also important they feel empowered and able to do things themselves. Reminders to self-care can be particularly helpful for friends who otherwise forget or don't feel motivated to do: *"You're feeling really rubbish? Ok, let's think what could help...?"*. This could be a reminder that **eating something is important for energy**. (This interactive resource can be particularly helpful, and you could send it directly: http://philome.la/jace_harr/you-feel-like-shit-an-interactive-self-care-guide/play). You could also **validate that it's ok to cancel their plans** (if they're not that important) and take a **self-care day (or evening)** to recover a bit, perhaps even asking a supervisor for an essay deadline extension. Friends may experience a lot of self-doubt and **hearing someone else say "looking after yourself is important"** and that **"your wellbeing is more important than your work"** can go a long way towards reaffirming this. Doing this is dependent on the problem at hand, and should be done so non-patronisingly and sensitively: **make sure** your friend finds reminders helpful and note that **self-care is individual** (your methods may be different from theirs) and some things are **easier said than done**.

Know your limits: Only offer what you feel comfortable offering.

Making an offer you will later have to **retract** or will feel stressed – perhaps **overburdened** – about making should be avoided, as that's not only bad for you (in terms of health) but also your friend (in terms of expectations). **Think critically about what your limits are** and what feels beyond and within them. *Can I help with this? Do I have time or energy? Is there something I can do to help that takes less time or energy? If not, that's ok.* You have **your own life and responsibilities** too, and it is reasonable – in fact, necessary – to bear these in mind and put yourself first. Where possible, try to **coordinate** favours with things you planned to do anyway. Moreover, **talk to other friends** and arrange how you can **share** your supporting responsibilities, if appropriate. Just being present (physically and via messages), you can provide **encouragement** for friends to do things, even while working on some of your own tasks. Suggestions and reminders, or helping breaking down tasks into steps, can further **facilitate** them in doing things for themselves. Remember though that the aim is to **get them back on their feet** when they're experiencing difficulties, **not to be continually supporting** them: there are services like their tutor, the University Counselling Service and the Disability Resource Centre for that, so encourage them to seek further support where necessary. **You are just a friend, and you have limits.**

In the long-run

Keep up with the fun things.

Supporting a friend isn't just about sharing worries and concerns - it's also about keeping up with **things you enjoy** and **spending time together as friends**. Even if they are going through a rough patch or regularly find themselves struggling, they're still your same friend. **Keep inviting your friend(s) to things**, even if they can't always make it. **Don't feel disheartened if they cancel at the last minute** and say they're not up to it; try and **suggest rearranging**, or ask if they want to talk instead.

Fun things you could do

- Make dinner together
- Watch a film or working through a box-set/Netflix series
- Share new music you've found
- Play a board game or video game
- Have tea and catch-up
- Pampering evening, with facemasks etc
- Going on a walk
- Talk about shared interests and hobbies

Be present.

This **doesn't need to be physically**. Messages like *"I hope you're doing ok. Just to let you know I'm here if you need me, like want to talk or chill"* give a sense of presence, even if your friend chooses to never come to you. Sometimes, just **having support as an option** can be enough. Given that time (and guilt reaching out) can be an issue, making an effort to invite your friends to **defined things you plan to do anyway** can be good: e.g. *"I'm going to [brunch/yoga/watch a film/sit outside]. Want to join me?"* Not only do these activities give you a **chance to spend some time together**, which feels good in itself, they also give you a **chance to talk**, which allows difficulties to begun to be voiced.

Remind them you care.

Mental health problems (depression, in particular) **can make people feel worthless and burdensome**, making them **feel reluctant to seek support from others**. The Mighty have put together some examples of texts people with depression might find helpful, that may be applicable to others too. The key points are reminding people that they're **not a burden; they matter and are loved**; and, while you can't completely understand, you're still there to listen. If you want some inspiration for constructing, it's worth a read: <https://themighty.com/2016/02/texts-to-send-someone-with-depression/>. It doesn't have to be a text: it could be a post-it note on their door, a meme or 'sticker' in their Facebook messenger inbox, or even a treat and a card in their pigeonhole.

It's ok if you don't understand.

While it's ok if you don't understand everything your friend is experiencing, you can learn by listening to them (if they choose to talk about it to you). Moreover, the Internet is a particularly good place to start to **better understand** whatever your friend is going through **without requiring them to explain everything** to you. Asking your friends more specific questions, based on background reading you've done, is often better than expecting them to explain everything from scratch.

Here are some potential places for information, to help build understanding

- Autonomous campaign websites: www.cusu.co.uk/representation
- Mind: www.mind.org.uk/information-support
- The Mighty (disability - incl. mental health problem - experiences): <https://themighty.com>
- Blueprint zine (intersectional student perspective on mental health): <https://blueprintzine.com>
- CUSU Welfare Section: www.cusu.co.uk/advice-support/welfare

Keep checking in; don't fade out.

While things may get better, **problems don't often pass in the space of a day or two**. Depending on what they are, they can go on for months, even years, and often have ups and downs. **Checking in regularly** (however often feels right) can be really beneficial. This is especially as, while support might surge when someone initially says or shows they're struggling, it often isn't maintained; this means a person might find themselves where they started, but **feel more embarrassed about reaching out again**. Moreover, an **external guise of coping** isn't always reflective of what's going on internally; in fact, work may be used as a **distraction or coping mechanism** from poor mental health. You could check in via message, text - or even card, if you want your friend to have a physical reminder of your message (remember you can send cards, or other items, between colleges for free using the CUSU mail service - a post-box will be in your porters). If you're not sure what to say, your messages ideally want to relay that you were thinking of them, hope they're ok or feeling a bit better, and (if you want) offering to see them soon. You could say something like *"Just wanted to let you know I was thinking about you. I saw a funny video you might like: [...]. I hope you're doing ok? Remember I'm still here if you need me. I'm going to lunch later, if you want to come?"*

NB: The final section of this guide includes information on accessing resources.

For a summary reminder of mental health support options, see www.cusu.co.uk/supporting-you/welfare/mental-health-support-options. For a PDF version of this guide that includes hyperlinks see www.cusu.co.uk/supporting-you/welfare/supporting-your-friends. **NOTE:** You may find some resources and/or situations in the next section triggering, so be mindful of your own wellbeing, skipping parts where necessary.

Facilitate access to further support.

Beyond College support available (e.g. their tutor), the three **most important University services** to remember are (1) the **University Counselling Service (UCS)**, (2) the **Students' Unions' Advice Service (SUAS)**, and (3) the **Disability Resource Centre (DRC)**. Beyond that, the **UCS' self-help leaflets**, **NHS website**, **SUAS website**, and **Mind's 'Information and Support' section** contain almost all the information you'll need to effectively support friends. The resources listed below are not exhaustive, and some may be more beneficial for you to read and understand, than to link directly to friends.

Key support services for Cambridge University students

- CUSU welfare pages: www.cusu.co.uk/supporting-you/welfare/mental-health-support-options
- College Nurse
- College Counsellor (*if applicable*)
- College Mental Health Advisor (*if applicable*)
- College Disability Liaison Officer
- Chaplain/Dean
- Tutor (*note: where necessary, one can change tutors*)
- (On-)Duty Tutor (*contact details obtained via porters*)
- Director of Studies (DoS)
- College / subject parents
- Autonomous campaigns: www.cusu.co.uk/representation
- University Counselling Service (UCS): www.counselling.cam.ac.uk
- UCS self-help resources: www.counselling.cam.ac.uk/selfhelp/newselhe
- Disability Resource Centre (DRC): www.disability.admin.cam.ac.uk
- Students' Unions' Advice Service (SUAS): www.studentadvice.cam.ac.uk
- GP: www.studentadvice.cam.ac.uk/support/external/gps
- Sexual Health Clinic: www.icash.nhs.uk/where-to-go/lime-tree-clinic-cambridge
- Cambridge Rape Crisis Centre: rapecrisis.org.uk/centres.php
- (Call) NHS 111, option 2 (24hr advice for mental health crises)
- Samaritans: www.samaritans.org/branches/cambridge-samaritans
- Nightline: linkline.org.uk
- Mind 'Information and Support': www.mind.org.uk/information-support
- Mind's 'I need urgent help' guide: www.mind.org.uk/i-need-urgent-help
- Porters or, more urgently, 999 (i.e. when there is an immediate threat to life)

Resources for the following potential situations

Emergencies

Harassment, bullying, discrimination, assault, abuse

Sexual harassment, assault or rape

General crime victim

Romantic relationship issues

LGBT+ related

Sexual health and pregnancy

Potential disability

Mental health problems

General health problem

Work stress or academic problems

Bereavement

Eating disorder

Men's mental health

Alcohol and/or drug problem

Anger and violence

Visa issues

Family-related issues

Considering or on intermission

Homesickness

Finance-related

Faith-related

Emergencies (CN: suicidal attempts, suicide intentions, self-harm)

- When to dial 999 (there is a life-threatening emergency): www.nhs.uk/NHSEngland/AboutNHSservices/Emergencyandurgentcareservices/Pages/responding-to-emergencies-FAQ.aspx
- Mental health crisis: www.nhs.uk/NHSEngland/AboutNHSservices/mental-health-services-explained/Pages/mental-health-emergencies.aspx
- Warning signs (of being at high risk of suicide): www.nhs.uk/Conditions/Suicide/Pages/warning-signs.aspx
- College Porters (trained in emergencies)
- If you feel it is an emergency and, but your friend is refusing help, seek support for them: an ambulance or the porters. Where possible and if it is safe to do so, let your friend know you are doing this, so they don't feel betrayed; even if they are upset in the short-term, they will (hopefully) understand in the longer-term. To quote an individual on the Mental Health Foundation website (www.mentalhealth.org.uk/a-to-z/f/friendship-and-mental-health), "My friend realised I had taken an overdose and rang for an ambulance... but has never judged me or criticised my action."
- If there is time, you could seek advice from the Students' Unions Advice Service (open 9-5, Mon-Fri), your College Porters, or another service about what to do, before acting.
- Remember, in particular, to seek support for yourself after having to deal with an emergency; they are stressful. Ensure your friend is getting support from other services.

Romantic relationship issues

Cambridge is a busy and pressured environment that can put strain on romantic relationships, or make them difficult to obtain in the first place. Your friend is not alone in this, and it is not a defect of their relational or emotional capacity. You may wish to remind your friend that you care about them.

- Perhaps relevant: 'How to Be Alone' (e.g. post-break-up) spoken-word poem (CN: exercise and food) www.youtube.com/watch?v=k7X7sZzSXYs
- College counsellor and/or nurse; University Counselling Service; chaplain
- Relate (relationship counselling): www.relatecambridge.org.uk
- UCS self-help resources on managing relationship conflict: www.counselling.cam.ac.uk/selfhelp/newselhe/relats
- See also 'harassment, bullying, discrimination, assault and abuse', if applicable

Harassment, bullying, discrimination, assault and abuse

- See www.cambridgestudents.cam.ac.uk/welfare-and-wellbeing/dignitystudy
- See also www.studentcomplaints.admin.cam.ac.uk
- Tutor; Students' Unions' Advice Service
- CUSU's autonomous campaigns (solidarity; sometimes opportunities to informally report)
- www.bullying.co.uk
- Police (www.studentadvice.cam.ac.uk/welfare/crime/)
- Mind resource on 'Abuse': www.mind.org.uk/information-support/guides-to-support-and-services/abuse
- Abuse charity for LGBT+ people: www.galop.org.uk/domesticabuse/
- Domestic abuse charity for women: www.womensaid.org.uk

Specifically experienced sexual harassment, assault or rape

Remember to highlight that it was not your friend's fault – avoid blame or doubt.

- *** Summary of support available (UCS self-help): www.counselling.cam.ac.uk/selfhelp/newselhe/sexass
- National Rape Crisis (<http://rapecrisis.org.uk>)
- Cambridge Rape Crisis Centre (cambridgerapecrisis.org.uk)
- Cambridge Sexual Assault and Referral Centre: www.oasiscentre.org
- College nurse, counsellor and/or mental health advisor
- University Counselling Service (*now has a harassment and assault advisor*)
- Options to report to college (if intra-college; policy on college website), university (www.studentcomplaints.admin.cam.ac.uk/harassment-and-sexual-misconduct) and/or the police (www.studentadvice.cam.ac.uk/welfare/crime)
- Tutor and SUAS can provide more specific support on the procedural sides
- In particularly serious cases, options your friend could also consider include changing college and intermission (discuss with tutor and the Students' Unions' Advice Service).
- GP for anxiety-reducing medication, if required
- Women's Aid (abuse and domestic violence charity): www.womensaid.org.uk
- Survivors UK (for men and non-binary people): www.survivorsuk.org
- CUSU Women's Campaign: www.womens.cusu.cam.ac.uk

General crime victim

- College porters (their number should be on the college website)
- 999 in emergency (immediate threat to life or of harm), 101 in non-emergency
- Parkside police: www.studentadvice.cam.ac.uk/welfare/crime
- Tutor, Students' Unions' Advice Service
- Counsellor for more ongoing support if necessary
- *See above two lists, if applicable*

Coming out as LGBT+, questioning sexuality or gender, or another LGBT+ related issue

- Student Minds' 'LGBTQ' www.studentminds.org.uk/lgbtq.html (*see 'supporting a friend'*)
- CUSU LGBT+ website (www.lgbt.cusu.cam.ac.uk)
- JCR/MCR LGBT+ officer
- LGBT+ Foundation (<http://lgbt.foundation/information-advice>)
- College nurse or counsellor; University Counselling Service

Sexual health and pregnancy

- CUSU welfare section: www.cusu.co.uk/supporting-you/welfare/sexual-health
- GP, college nurse, Lime Tree sexual health clinic (on Mill Rd), pharmacy

General health problem

- GP, college nurse; Addenbrooke's Hospital
- General help: www.studentadvice.cam.ac.uk/welfare/generalhealth
- NHS 111 (out of hours GP; option 2 is 24hrs mental health crisis support)
- NHS Self-help advice: www.nhs24.com/selfhelpguide/atoz/
- NHS 'Student Health': www.nhs.uk/livewell/studenthealth/Pages/Studenthealthhome.aspx
- Specifically cancer: www.teenagecancertrust.org/get-help
- *Also see 'potential disability' if (relatively) long-term and/or drugs and alcohol sections*

(Potential) disability, or other need for reasonable adjustments

It is not uncommon for people to come to University with undiagnosed hidden disabilities, having done well at school. New demands can mean that previous coping mechanisms are not sufficient, and support needs to be sought - which is nothing to be embarrassed about. Other disabilities may also develop at university, e.g. chronic fatigue or repetitive strain injury (RSI), or be exacerbated due to otherwise unmet needs.

- Disability Resource Centre www.disability.admin.cam.ac.uk
 - Note that 70% of those registered with the service do not self-define as disabled
 - Building Access Guide: www.disability.admin.cam.ac.uk/building-access-guide
 - Etiquette: www.disability.admin.cam.ac.uk/about-drc/etiquette
- College Disability Liaison Officer (DLO), in the your college tutorial office
- CUSU Disabled Students' Campaign: www.disabled.cusu.cam.ac.uk

Mental health problems, e.g. depression, anxiety

Note that mental health problems are often hidden and you may only see your friend when they're relatively functional rather than struggling, so don't make assumptions!

- Mind: www.mind.org.uk/information-support
- College nurse or counsellor, GP, University Counselling Service, tutor, SUAS
- Can self-refer for CBT at the Cambridge Psychological Wellbeing Service, though there is a waiting list: www.cpft.nhs.uk/services/pws/psychological-wellbeing-service.htm
- CUSU website welfare section on Listening lines www.cusu.co.uk/supporting-you/welfare/mental-health-support-options
- Nightline (student-run listening line): linkline.org.uk/
- Samaritans (listening line): www.samaritans.org
- Blueprint zine (Cambridge-based student-run intersectional mental health zine): <https://blueprintzine.com>
- Disability Resource Centre & Disabled Students' Campaign (see 'potential disability')

Bereavement

- Tutor, college nurse and/or counsellor
- UCS Bereavement Group (need to book onto): www.counselling.cam.ac.uk/studentcouns/studentgroups
- Help with effects of bereavement (Mind): www.mind.org.uk/information-support/guides-to-support-and-services/bereavement
- UCS self-help: www.counselling.cam.ac.uk/selfhelp/newselhe/bereav
- SUAS advice: www.studentadvice.cam.ac.uk/welfare/bereavement/

Work stress / academic problems

- Student Minds 'exam stress' help: www.studentminds.org.uk/exam-stress.html
- SUAS academic resources: www.studentadvice.cam.ac.uk/academic/study
- UCS workshops: www.counselling.cam.ac.uk/studentcouns/studentgroups
- UCS self-help (based on workshops):
 - Concentration: www.counselling.cam.ac.uk/selfhelp/selfleafpdf/concent/view
 - Procrastination: www.counselling.cam.ac.uk/selfhelp/selfleafpdf/procras/view
 - Coping with Exams: www.counselling.cam.ac.uk/selfhelp/selfleafpdf/copexam/view
- DoS; tutor; supervisor(s)
- Students' Unions' Advice Service
- Subject or college parents; common room Education or Academic Affairs Officer...

- ...Course peers; Course Reps
- If particularly struggling, note the potential of an undiagnosed specific learning disability, like dyslexia, or other disability, like autism. See *'potential disability'*

Eating disorder

NOTE (1) Be careful of complementing weight loss. Instead, you could try the more neutral comment "I've noticed you've lost weight." **(2)** Eating disorders are often more about control and resisting change and/or perfectionism than aesthetic reasons per-se, so "but you look nice" justifications don't always get to the root of the problem. **(3)** Eating disorders do not always mean losing (or gaining) weight: someone with an unhealthy pattern of bingeing and purging may stay the same weight. **(4)** While eating disorders are most common among women, people of any gender can develop one.

- www.studentminds.org.uk/uploads/3/7/8/4/3784584/student_eating_disorder_fact_sheet.pdf (Student Minds' factsheet)
- B-eat (eating disorders charity): <http://bit.ly/2pZp3bK>
- College nurse; GP
- University Counselling Service: ED counsellor or Food & Mood group workshop
- UCS self-help: www.counselling.cam.ac.uk/selfhelp/newselhe/disbod
- NHS-provided support: www.cpft.nhs.uk/services/eating-disorders-service.htm
- Men Get Eating Disorders Too: mengetedstoo.co.uk

Men's mental health

- www.disabled.cusu.cam.ac.uk/2017/05/13/men-and-mental-health-mhaw17/
- Campaign Against Living Miserably (preventing male suicide): www.thecalmzone.net
- Dissecting masculinity poem (CN: self-harm, son-father relationship, alcohol): www.nowness.com/story/what-men-fear-most-bloke-fears-elliott-barnes-worrell
- Men may express mental health problems in a different way to people of other genders. Research suggests they tend to externalise feelings, showing signs of irrational anger, or becoming dependent on alcohol or recreational drugs (*see next*)

Alcohol and/or drug problem

Note that while addiction itself can be classed as a mental health problem, some people use alcohol or other drugs to self-medicate other mental health problems, like anxiety and depression.

- College nurse; GP
- Drinkaware: www.drinkaware.co.uk (note section 'I'm concerned about someone else')
- Mind on alcohol and drugs: www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/drugs-recreational-drugs-alcohol/#.WQEfaCMrJhE
- Counselling for alcohol problem from Cambridge-based service Drinksense (drinksense.org/en) or Inclusion (www.inclusion-cambridgeshire.org.uk)
- UCS (counselling or self-help): www.counselling.cam.ac.uk/selfhelp/selfleafpdf/manalco/view
- Alcoholics Anonymous: www.aa.org
- For what to do in a case of alcohol poisoning, see: www.drinkaware.co.uk/alcohol-facts/health-effects-of-alcohol/effects-on-the-body/alcohol-poisoning.
- In the case of a drug overdose or a 'bad trip' it is not illegal to seek medical support.
- NHS on 'drugs': www.nhs.uk/Livewell/drugs/Pages/Drugshome.aspx
- Frank: www.talktofrank.com/worried-about-a-friend

Anger and violence (towards self or others)

Anger can be a justified emotion, e.g. in response to unfairness. However, when excessive, frequent and/or unjustified, it can be connected to mental health problems, and may cause harm, to the self or others. In the case of violence, make sure you put your own safety first. You could seek urgent support from the porters, or, if necessary, the emergency services.

- Mind on 'anger': www.mind.org.uk/information-support/types-of-mental-health-problems/anger/about-anger/#.WQEPTyMrJhE
- Tutor; counsellor; porters; Students' Unions' Advice Service
- UCS (self-help or counselling): www.counselling.cam.ac.uk/selfhelp/selfleafpdf/anger/view

Visa issues

- International Students' Team: www.ist.admin.cam.ac.uk/contact
- UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA): www.ukcisa.org.uk
- Tutor; Students' Unions' Advice Service

Considering or on intermission

If your friend does decide to intermit, make sure to keep in touch with them during intermission, and when they return. Intermission can be very isolating. It may be helpful to update them with things going on and keep inviting them to things even if they can't always attend. Check what they want, and respect if they need some separation to recover.

- Tutor (key figure in intermission); potentially DoS too
- DSC 'Guide to Undergraduate Intermission': www.disabled.cusu.cam.ac.uk/intermission
- Students' Unions' Advice Service (*provides support during intermission too*)
- UCS self-help: www.counselling.cam.ac.uk/selfhelp/selfleafpdf/intermi/view

Faith-related

- List of faith societies: www.studentadvice.cam.ac.uk/welfare/faith/
- Disability Resource Centre for faith-related reasonable adjustments

Homesickness

What is it they miss about home in particular? Can you do anything to help?

- UCS self-help: www.counselling.cam.ac.uk/selfhelp/selfleafpdf/homes/view
- If international, iCUSU: www.international.cusu.cam.ac.uk
- Faith societies, if applicable: www.studentadvice.cam.ac.uk/welfare/faith/
- Tutor; Students' Unions' Advice Service

Finance

- SUAS: www.studentadvice.cam.ac.uk/welfare/finance/ (*signposts to other services*)
- Tutor; Students' Unions' Advice Service
- University hardship funds (need to go via tutor): www.cambridgestudents.cam.ac.uk/fees-and-funding/financial-hardship-support-access-funds
- Students' Minds info: www.studentminds.org.uk/studentfinance.html

Wishing you support in supporting your friends – make sure to look after yourself too!