
WORRIED ABOUT A STUDENT?

There can be many different reasons why you might be concerned about a student. It may be that the student is experiencing difficulty or behaving in a way which is causing you anxiety. You may be worried about someone who you are supervising who is depressed or acting out of character.

When someone is in difficulty we may feel helpless, impatient or angry and have a great need to **do** something.

It may be helpful to reflect on a time when you have felt helped by someone else, and what that was like. It is likely that what you have found to be helpful in the past will be echoed in what follows.

The solutions that people find for themselves are generally the right ones for them. In order to arrive at their solutions they are greatly helped by having a safe space and time to process what is causing them difficulty.

The first step is to really listen.

Listeners often feel that they are not **doing** enough to help and may be tempted to intervene by giving advice and offering solutions to the speaker's problems or by giving reassurance that everything will be alright. Such responses may be interpreted by the recipient as a form of rejection, taking control away from them, or as an inability to really listen to their pain and stay with them during it.

It can be very difficult to listen closely to another person and to try to put yourself in their shoes. However, far from being ineffective active listening is one of the greatest gifts that one person can offer another.

The process of feeling another person is really trying to understand your experience and of accepting you unconditionally, without trying to take control or setting themselves up as an "expert" can be very empowering.

Know your limitations and what you are willing and able to do.

It may be that you do not have the time that seems to be required or you may feel that the problems are too deep or longstanding for you to respond to and that you are out of your depth.

If you are closely involved with the person needing help it's possible that what they are expressing is threatening or distressing to you. This will make it difficult to listen to what they are saying. If you feel unable to help for any reason it would be useful to explore other options with him/her e.g. student advisor, doctor, counsellor. Gently introducing the idea of counselling or some other avenue may be helpful. It could be supportive to offer to phone or

accompany them when they have an idea of what they would like to do. People “coerced” into counselling can rarely make use of it. The decision needs to come from them.

If you feel that someone is seriously ill and is unable to take responsibility for themselves, it would be wise to discuss options with someone in the medical profession or in confidence with someone in the Counselling Service.

Be Clear

Be as clear as possible about what you feel able to offer. If you offer to do more than you can cope with and then have to withdraw, the student may feel let down.

Give the person time to consider what feels helpful. When people feel judged or pressurised they become defensive and by definition this is not an easy position from which to make changes or decisions.

It is important to take good care of yourself

If you become stressed and worn out you will be unable to be helpful to others.

It's not easy to be in close contact with someone experiencing prolonged emotional difficulty, especially if you feel very concerned for them. You may feel helpless, bewildered, guilty and resentful. Review your support systems and nurture yourself with friends and activities that sustain you. You may need support as well from someone you trust and to whom you can express your fears and feelings.

Try not to become immersed in the other's difficulties. If you are careful to see that your needs are met, you will find it much easier to be supportive.

We can be responsible **to** other adults but we are not responsible **for** them.

If you are listening and giving support to someone else in difficulty here are some general principles and practical points to bear in mind.

Listen carefully and check with the speaker that you understand what they are saying

“This is what I heard. Have I got it right?”

Try to accept the person's experience even when their values and opinions are different from yours

“I accept what you are saying and it doesn't matter if my experience is not the same”.

Try to empathise (This is trying to put yourself in the other person's shoes and understanding the world from their point of view.)

“I sense from what you are saying that you are very upset/ confused/angry about that.....”

Take time to listen by making an arrangement that will suit you both so that you won't be interrupted

“I only have ten minutes now but we could have longer this afternoon”.

Be honest when you don't have the answer

“I can’t provide answers but together we might be able to work out alternatives and your feelings about each of them”.

Be trustworthy

If people are to talk freely they need to be able to trust you not to pass on to others anything that they say. They may give you permission to do so, but you need to agree with them **exactly** what they feel is OK for you to pass on and what isn’t.

If what you are being told involves the safety of others including yourself, be clear about your concern and offer to help the student find an appropriate source of help. There are occasions when you have to act independently or tell someone appropriate who can help.

If you would like some information the Counselling Service can provide leaflets and a list of resources that may be helpful. MIND at www.mind.org also has an extensive range of booklets on various subjects that can be read online or downloaded.

It may sound like a cliché but what means most to those in difficulty is that you are there for them, without judging them and that you trust them to find the answers they need. This is as important as the practical help or suggestions that you offer.

A full list of both internal and external support resources can be found on our website www.abdn.ac.uk/counselling/links