

Conversation Guidebook

How to Support

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How to Support

Planning the Conversation

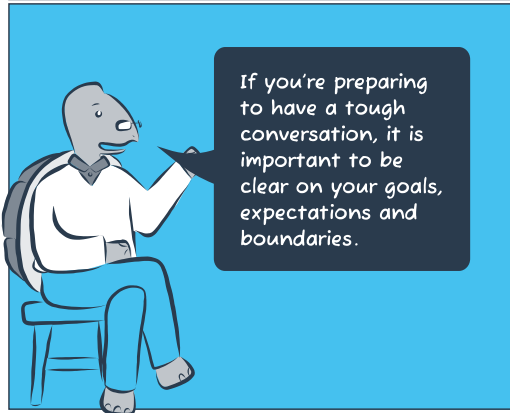
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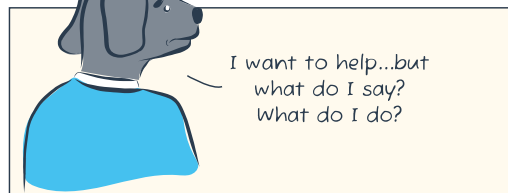
It isn't always possible to plan your conversation, but when you do, it can help you feel more comfortable and confident. Supportive conversations don't always go the way you hoped. The person you're trying to support may not be ready to have the conversation, may not feel comfortable enough to open up to you, or may have a reaction that you weren't expecting. In getting ready for tough conversations, it is important to be clear on your **goals, expectation, and boundaries**.

Taking the time to be clear about these pieces allows you to prepare yourself to step comfortably into the unknown. It is also important to choose a good time and place that is private – maybe when you are doing something the two of you like to do together, like going for a walk, a drive, or playing a game together.

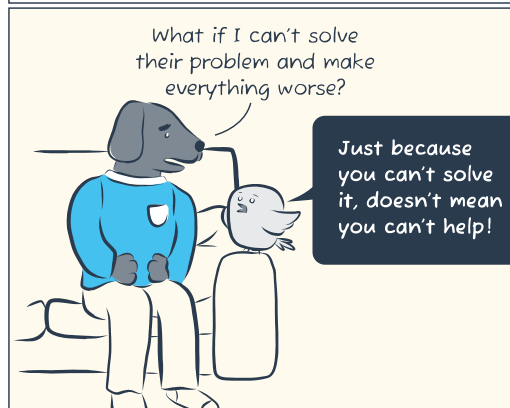
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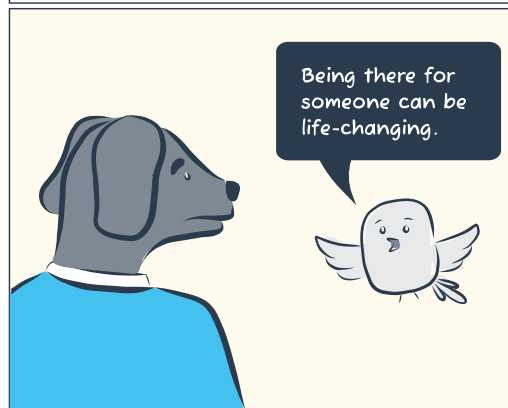
GOALS. Be clear on what you want to say or do, and why. While you can help, actually solving their problem isn't up to you.



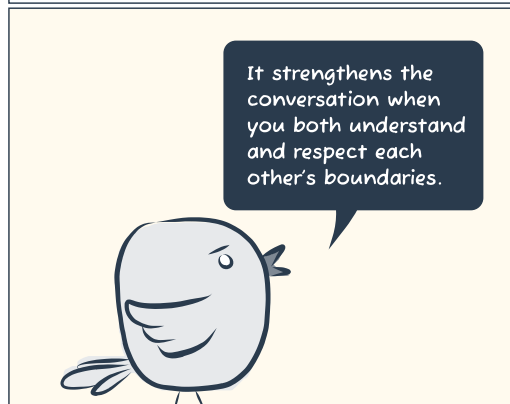
EXPECTATIONS. Keep your expectations in check. We don't know what is going to happen when we start a conversation.



ROLE. Your role here is to be an emotional support, which is more valuable than you might think.



BOUNDARIES. It's also important that we take care of ourselves when helping someone else.



It isn't selfish to set boundaries. There are limits to what you can and can't do.



Steps to Planning the Conversation

Your Goals

Get clear on what you want to say or do and why. Many people make the mistake of believing or hoping they can solve another person's problems. While you can help, solving the problem isn't up to you. Even with our best intentions, other people's actions and thoughts are not ours to control. Working through issues can only be done by the person with the issue. Be prepared that there may be no solution at the end.

Don't worry! Just because you can't solve everything doesn't mean you can't help. Your goal here is to provide emotional support, which is more valuable than you might expect. Simply recognizing something is wrong, asking if they're doing alright, and listening compassionately can be life-changing.

Your Expectations

It is important to keep your expectations in check. We don't know what is going to happen when we start a conversation. It is important to understand that we are all human beings having a unique human experience. What you hope or want to happen is not always likely to happen. Part of being a support in someone's life is understanding that you are not responsible for other people's happiness, but that being there for them in a supportive way makes a big difference. They may still be sad after you talk, but people can be sad and okay at the same time. Your support is valuable!

Your Boundaries

When someone we care about is going through something, we sometimes feel the obligation to give as much of ourselves as it takes to help them feel better. But it is important that we take care of ourselves when helping others. Setting boundaries isn't selfish. If set properly, it can strengthen the conversation because both people understand what they can say and do. Understanding and respecting the boundaries of the person you're supporting is equally important.

Clearly state what you can and cannot do when necessary. Some examples of boundaries are ending an interaction if the person you're supporting begins to get aggressive, if you notice your anxiety rising, or if they're asking too much of you. Boundaries are different for each person and can change as the conversation evolves. It is important that you define your own. Protecting yourself is important. Start by asking yourself what is okay and what is not.

Be prepared to communicate your boundaries when they're pushed. If you decide not to be a part of the situation, consider what you can do or how you can help while maintaining your boundaries. Here are some things you can say:

- *I don't feel comfortable helping with this right now, but what I can do is...*
- *I can't help you with that, but have you heard of this service...*
- *I don't think I'm the best person to help you with this. Have you thought about talking to...*

If you have the opportunity, it can be helpful to suggest a resource such as those in our Resource Section. It is also helpful to suggest they talk to someone who may be better equipped to have this conversation, like a friend, family member, or doctor. If they are at risk of harm to themselves, it is important to stay with them, keep them safe, and get help immediately.



You don't always have to express what you've decided you can do and why and what you hope will happen, but it is important to know what they are going into the conversation. It is important to honour the boundaries you've set if you encounter something that pushes those boundaries.

How to Support Things to Keep in Mind ...



The Mental Health Goal

Mental health and wellness is not about always being happy, never feeling sad or angry. It is okay not to be okay! All of our emotions have a function, are part of life, and are how we grow. We are allowed, and expected, to feel. Struggles become a problem when they get to a place where they negatively impact our lives and require support to get through.

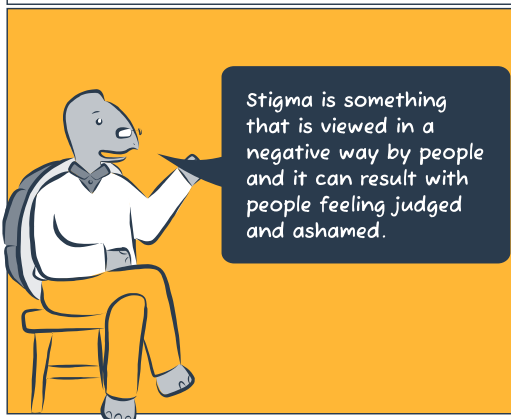
The question is, how do we cope with not being okay? Or for the purpose of supportive conversations, how do we help someone cope with not being okay? The goal is to realize what you're feeling, why you're feeling it, and learn the skills to work through it.

Why Have the Conversation?

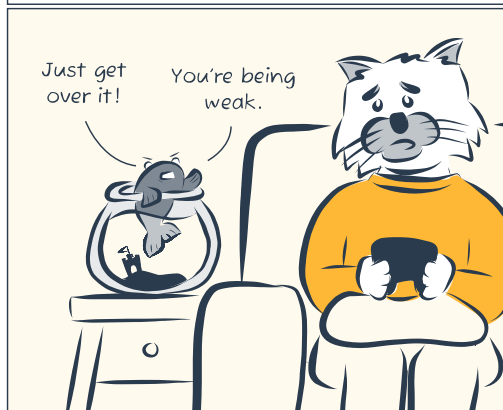
Have the conversation because for most people struggling, talking is the first step towards getting help and feeling better. Have the conversation because you care about your friends and family. Have the conversation because it strengthens the bond between you and another person. You might expect that they have other people in their lives who know them better and will check in on them, but you may be the only person. Just have the conversation because it could:

- Help someone realize they're not alone
- Be the push that gives the confidence to open up
- Bring a sense of relief
- Help someone feel connected again
- Make someone feel like they have value
- Save a life

When having a conversation with someone, it's important to know there can be stigmas and negative myths around mental health.



There are negative myths around mental health which are damaging and stop people from caring for each other and themselves.



There are multiple reasons why people might not seek help, such as stigma and lack of understanding of mental health.



Talking is the first step towards getting help and feeling better.



Experiencing struggles in life is normal. They might be going through a tough time in their lives.



Struggles become a problem when they are having a negative impact on our life and sometimes we need support to get through it.



Things to Keep in Mind

STEPS TO
SUPPORT

Stigma

We hear the word 'stigma' a lot, but what does it mean? Stigma is a negative attitude toward a social characteristic, like mental health. You also see stigma around other parts of humanity, like gender, race, and sexuality. Unfortunately, mental health is still quite stigmatized. But the more we talk about something and understand it, the less stigmatized it becomes.

Because there is stigma around mental health, people are sometimes scared of judgement and feel shame when they are dealing with something challenging, which leads to people not seeking out help and feeling isolated and alone.

We all deal with challenging times. It is part of life. The more we learn, and the more we talk about this, the less stigmatized it becomes, and the better we will all be.

Negative Myths

Part of understanding stigma is understanding that there are negative myths that exist around mental health. These myths (or misunderstandings) are damaging because they stop people from having compassion for each other, compassion for themselves, and reaching out for help.

Some myths you might recognize:

- **Having mental health struggles means you are weak**
- **Being emotional is a sign of weakness**
- **You have to be stoic, tough, and silent**
- **Life is a struggle**
- **It's your fault**
- **Eventually you will just 'get over it'**

It is important that we recognize these myths and work toward changing them with education and understanding.

Normalizing Mental Health

Encountering struggles in life is normal! We need to start speaking about mental health issues the way we would talk about cataracts or a broken leg. Unfortunately, because it is harder to see the cause of a mental health issue, we sometimes see people struggling as 'different' or 'broken'. But they are not different or broken. They are just going through a tough time in their lives.

We also sometimes associate people with mental health issues or mental illness as weak, incapable, or dangerous. It is important to understand that we are not defined by our mental wellness, and that we are all at some point in our lives going to experience challenges with our mental health. There are many factors that influence mental health and recovery from mental challenges, including biological, genetic, environmental, and social.

So, what can we do to normalize mental health? Learn. Spread awareness. Use language to separate the person from the problem. We view 'a depressed person' differently than 'a person experiencing depression'. As people, we are built to talk and share. This is what will help us move toward a healthier future.

**"It's okay
to not
be okay."**

Things to Keep in Mind

Why People Don't Always Help Themselves

If you're wondering why people sometimes don't help themselves or seek out help, there are multiple reasons. Stigma and lacking understanding of mental health are underlying causes, which is why it is so important for us to have these conversations and be open to learning. More specific reasons could be:

- Not knowing help is out there
- Feeling like the supports that do exist aren't for them to use
- Fear of getting help because they haven't in the past
- Not understanding something is wrong, or that something could be better
- Not having the energy, will, or confidence to get help because the issue is preventing it
- Thinking that you can solve the problem on your own
- Thinking you are the type of person who shouldn't need any help



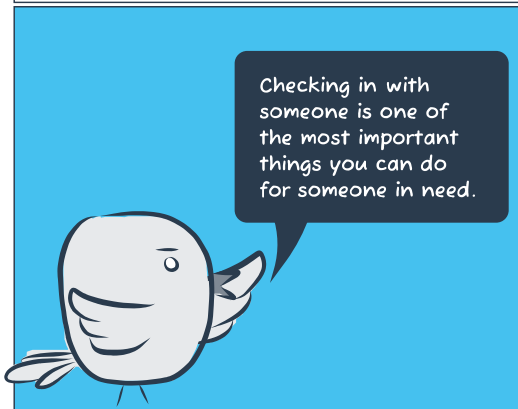
How to Support

Starting the Conversation

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Opening a supportive conversation is sometimes uncomfortable and may never feel 100% like the right time! Don't avoid it because of small things. There are no hard and fast rules to know if someone is in a good space to have a conversation. The best way to find out is to ask. If you are unsure whether or not to open a conversation, remember that checking in is one of the best things you can do for someone in need.

There are no hard and fast rules to know if someone is in a good space to have a conversation. The best way to find out is to ask.



While having supportive conversations is important, it is also important to pick your moment.



1. Make sure you both have enough time to have a conversation.



2. Create the proper environment to ensure the person you're supporting feels comfortable.



3. Share what you've noticed (be specific!) and why you're concerned. Keep it simple, direct, and genuine.



If they don't open up the first time, that's okay. What's important is that they know you're there when they're ready.



Steps to Starting the Conversation

1. The Right Time and Place

While having supportive conversations is important, it is also important to pick your moment. Creating the proper environment where the person you're supporting will feel comfortable is key. As general guidelines:

- *Make sure you both have enough time to have a conversation*
- *Choose an environment that feels safe for the person you intend to talk to*
- *Consider approaching the conversation when you are doing something you enjoy doing together, like going for a walk, a drive, or playing a game*



If they don't want to open up, that's okay. What's important is that they know you're there when they are ready. Opening up to a friend or family member can be hard, and we are all at different places in our journey. Know that it may take a number of tries to start the conversation. And most importantly, respect if someone doesn't want to talk. But leave the door open and continue to check in.

2. Create a 'Safe Space'

A 'safe space' is a trusting environment where the person you're supporting will feel comfortable to talk with you. They need to know that if they share their story with you, it will be handled in a private, non-judgmental, safe way, and that they will be supported.

3. Share What You've Noticed and Express Concern

Asking 'How have you been?' or 'How's it going?' isn't always going to lead into a serious conversation. Your challenge is getting past 'I'm fine!'. It is important that they understand you are genuinely asking how they have been doing. Being specific about what you've noticed and why you're concerned allows people the space to move from 'I'm fine!' to a more open conversation.

An example could sound like:

'I've noticed that you've been low energy the last couple weeks, and I'm wondering if you're doing okay.'

Keep it simple, direct, and genuine!

How to Support

During the Conversation



There is a lot of fear and uncertainty for many people around what to say in a supportive conversation. This focus on having the right words sometimes makes us freeze and stops people from checking in with friends and family at all. Really, the power isn't in what you say...it's in what you do. The most impactful pieces of these conversations are checking in, actively listening without judgement, and genuinely caring. Everything else is extra!

Remember, this is a skill that needs practice. Expect that it may be awkward or messy in the beginning. That's okay! It takes practice, but it is essential work. The important thing is that the conversation is happening.

If you are still searching for the words to say once the conversation has begun, continue reading for some guidelines.

Knowing what to say can be scary and uncertain.

I'm worried that I'll say the wrong thing and make things worse.



That's okay. The power isn't in what you say but what you do and how you make them feel.



It may feel awkward to begin with but that's okay. It takes practice.

If you're feeling stuck for words, here are a few tips that can help...



THANK AND VALIDATE. It isn't easy to open up and be vulnerable about something that is going on in your life.



It sounds like you're going through something really hard. Thank you for sharing this with me.

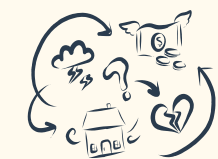


BE VULNERABLE. Share your story to build connection and normalise what they are going through.

When I found myself in a similar situation, talking to a counsellor was really helpful.



ASK OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS. Ask gentle, probing, open-ended questions that prompt them to continue exploring their feelings.



I'm sorry that happened. How are you feeling about it?



Don't focus on trying to make things better, it's not about what you say, it's how you make them feel.



During the Conversation

STEPS TO
SUPPORT

Thank and Validate

It isn't easy to open up and be vulnerable about something going on in your life. Simply saying, 'It sounds like you're going through something really hard. Thank you for sharing this with me.' can go a long way to building trust and creating a safe space for them to open up.

Be Vulnerable

Sharing your own experience can be very powerful. It normalizes and creates the space for others to begin being vulnerable too. Where comfortable and your experience overlaps, share your story in a way that keeps the focus on them. Saying something like, 'When I found myself in a similar situation, talking to a counsellor was really helpful.' can be very helpful. The realization that you had a similar experience and that you found help allows them to think about both in a different way.

The point of sharing is not to belittle their experience or to tell them that you understand what they are going through. It's not to one-up them. Everyone's experience is different. Sharing your experience is to build connection and normalize what they are going through. If you don't have a similar experience, that's okay! Try to understand what they are going through. Some things you can say are 'Tell me more about how you are feeling.' or 'Help me understand what you're feeling right now'. Mutual vulnerability can really open the doors to combating stigma.

Ask Questions

Your intention for this conversation is to allow the person you're supporting the opportunity to talk through what they're experiencing. Focus on asking gentle, probing, open-ended questions that prompt them to continue exploring their feelings:

'That must have been very difficult. How are you feeling about it?'



The focus of this conversation for you is **not what you say**, it is **how they feel afterward**. You are not providing therapy. You are not expected to 'fix them'. Your role is to convey your genuine compassion, listen, and let them know you are there for them.

Speak in a natural tone of voice. Let your body communicate what you're there for—hold eye contact, put a hand on their back, hold their hand, lead in because you're interested.

Turn off your phone and put it away. And where appropriate, laughter is liberating. Don't focus on trying to make it better, focus on making a genuine human connection.

*"Thank you
for sharing
this with me."*

How to Support What To Do Next ...



When the conversation finds its way to a closing point and you've listened to what they have been struggling with, it is your opportunity to suggest seeking supports like a counsellor or in the case of a youth, a trusted adult who can assist.

When to Suggest Seeking Professional Help

It may be obvious in some conversations that further support is needed, but others may not. Part of normalizing the conversation around mental health and reducing stigma is realizing and championing the idea that mental health supports are there for everyone. At some point in our lives, most of us will experience a mental health challenge that would be easier to deal with if we had professional support.

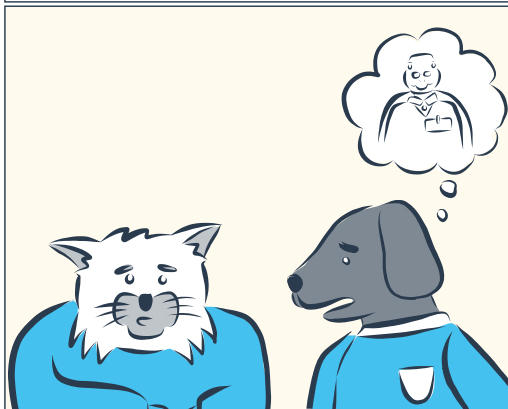
Though it is sometimes hard to recommend professional help to a friend or family member, it is important to help them take this step so they can get the support they need. Some examples of ways to say this are:

'Have you thought about booking an appointment with a counsellor?'

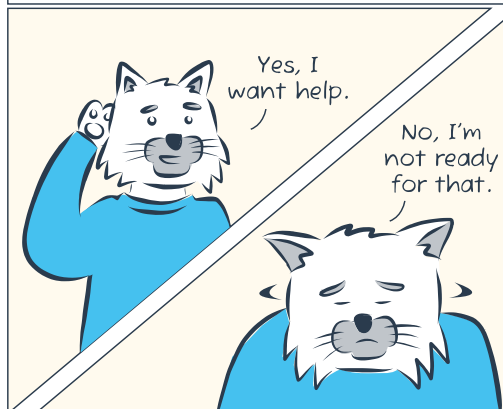
'What do you think the next steps in getting some support would be?'

Sharing your own experience seeking out and engaging support is also very powerful in helping people feel comfortable taking the step themselves. But know that someone may not be ready or comfortable enough to engage professional support, and it is not your place to force it on them. Allow them space to make their own decisions, but let them know you are there to help when and if they decide to take the next step. This may take some time, don't get discouraged and don't give up on them.

After listening to what they've been struggling with, if you think they need help, encourage them to find professional help.



When suggesting professional help, it depends on their readiness. They may or may not be ready and that's okay.



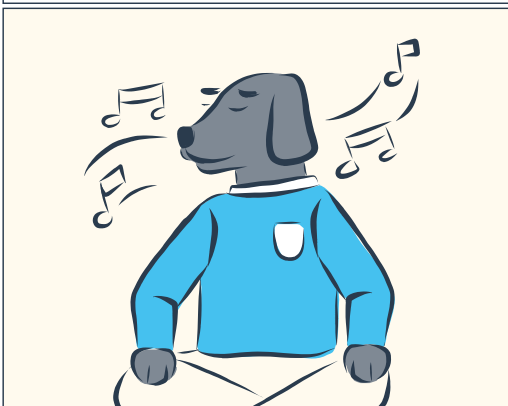
If YES, support them in making a plan.



If NO, continue to check back in.



These conversations can be intense. It's important to protect your energy when supporting others.



Don't forget that it's just as important for YOU to take a step back and practice self care.



Making a Plan

When dealing with mental health, earlier is always better. If the person you are supporting expresses that they would like to move forward with professional support, make a plan around:

1. **What support to engage** (e.g. family doctor, counsellor, community service, support group)
2. **Who will be involved** (e.g. if you will be helping them make the call or driving them to the appointment)
3. **And when it will happen**

It can be confusing and intimidating to reach out for help, which is why it is so important to create a plan with them and help them stick to it. Always follow through on any agreements you've made regarding the plan, as this is an area where trust can easily be broken.

If you are supporting a youth, encourage them to talk to a trusted adult for any of these steps that feel out of reach or uncomfortable.

Check Back In

Whether they decide to seek help or not, continue to check back in. Do your best to get permission from them to check back in, and maybe set a time or date. It can help the individual struggling to know they have a conversation coming up. Keep an eye on their behaviour and ask questions about how they have been doing since your last conversation. You may notice they are better every time you talk. You may also notice that they are doing worse, at which point it may be time to suggest again that they seek out a professional.

Your interactions shouldn't always be around support and mental health. A large part of getting through struggles in life is having regular human connections—go for walks, watch movies, have conversations, share meals.



There are no hard and fast rules to how these conversations will go. Everyone is unique, and so are the situations they find themselves in. What is important is that at the end of the conversation, they know you will be there to support them when they need you.

Thank them for trusting you enough to share with you and ask permission to check back in on them if appropriate.

Recognize that being a support to someone can take a lot of energy, especially if the conversation was emotionally intense. Support does not equal responsibility. It is important to be there for people, but there is only so much you can do.

Consider providing yourself some self-care time after intense conversations—journal, go for a walk, meditate. It is important to protect your energy when supporting others.

“It’s just as important for YOU to take a step back and practice self-care.”

Support Resources

STEP TO
SUPPORT

People sometimes don't seek out help for themselves because they: don't know what resources exist, are overwhelmed by the number of different resources out there, don't believe the resources are meant for their use, don't know what to expect, or aren't able to get help because their struggle is too overwhelming.

No matter what the reason, your role as a support is to help them connect to resources and navigate the process. This could look like helping them find the right resource, talking openly about your own experiences with seeking support, helping them take the first step, or even offering to drive them to their first appointment.

Call Here to Find Support

211

Phone or Text - 211
Live Chat Online - www.211.ca
Online Resources - www.211.ca

211 is an information and referral system that helps connect people to a full range of community, social, health, and government services. It is a free and confidential service that can be accessed 24 hours a day, in more than 150 languages by phone, chat, text, and web.

211 operators are highly trained to assess your need and refer you to the most appropriate services, whether that be health or social services like mental health support, food, and shelter... or just helping you find where you can volunteer, donate, or receive financial assistance for rent/utility or turn for legal support.

Though 211 is a Canada-wide service, when you call it goes to your local chapter, meaning you're talking with someone who knows the supports and services of your province or territory.

*If you are looking for Newcomer, LGBTQ2+, or other specific resources, 211 will be able to direct you to the right services.

Crisis Services

Distress Centre Calgary

Phone or Text - 403-266-HELP (4357)
Online Chat - www.distresscentre.com

Distress Centre Calgary (DCC) provides 24-hour crisis support, professional counselling, youth peer support and referrals through 211 and our programs at SORCe – all at no cost. Phone support is offered in over 200 languages.

The Distress Centre is a place to turn in times of crisis. They don't define crisis. They don't judge. Anyone can call, text, or chat anytime, day or night.

Crisis Services Canada

Text - 45645 (4pm - Midnight ET)
Website - www.crisisservicescanada.ca

***For residents of Quebec, call 1 866 APPELLE (1-866-277-3553)**

Crisis Services Canada (CSC) is a Canada-wide network of existing distress, crisis and suicide prevention line services. This service is for any person living in Canada who is affected by suicide, whether for yourself or worried about someone else. This is the number to call. They deal with each call in the most caring and least intrusive manner possible.

Anyone can have suicidal thoughts for a number of reasons. CSC offers a barrier-free, non-judgmental space with supportive and responsive responders. They are here so anyone thinking about suicide feels comfortable enough to reach out for support.

Indigenous-Specific Resources

The Hope for Wellness Help Line

Phone - 1-855-242-3310

Live Chat Online - www.hopeforwellness.ca

The Hope for Wellness Help Line offers immediate help to all indigenous peoples across Canada, 24 hours a day, seven days a week and is available in English, French and upon request in Cree, Ojibway, and Inuktitut. Online chat services are available in English and French, with expansion to Indigenous languages currently being explored.

Experienced and culturally competent Help Line counsellors can help if you are distressed, having strong emotional reactions, are triggered by painful memories, or just want to talk. If asked, counsellors can also work with you to find other wellness supports that are available near you.

*Former Residential School students can call 1-866-925-4419 for emotional crisis referral services and information on other health supports from the Government of Canada.

Build Your Skills

CMHA School of Peer Support



www.cmha.calgary.ab.ca/education-training/become-a-peer

Through the School of Peer Support, CMHA Calgary provides 83 hours of in-class training, 50 hours of unpaid practicum experience, and opportunities to connect to the Peer Supporter Community of Practice. Our students learn about peer support from a formalized, but non-clinical lens, and explore using their newly gained skills to support others one-on-one, through groups, as ambassadors, or as educators.

CMHA Recovery College



www.cmha.calgary.ab.ca/education-training/recovery-college

Recovery College uses an educational-based approach to help people recognize and develop their own resourcefulness and awareness to support themselves or their loved one's recovery journey. Everyone is welcome to attend our free courses. No experience is required and with lots of courses to choose from, there is something for everyone.

The group education courses are for those 16 years and older. The focus of our courses are on building resiliency, hope, and self-care. They are designed and delivered in partnership with our Peer Supporters. We deliver more than 45 courses through registered and drop-in courses (currently all virtual). There is no referral, eligibility, or pre-requisites to participate.

Natural Supports Simulation

www.naturalsupports.ca

The Natural Supports Simulation is an online interactive experience that raises awareness for the Natural Support role by building skills and confidence. This online tool helps adults learn to actively listen, validate emotions, remove stigma around mental health, and engage in supportive conversations with children and youth.