

Students Spoke, We Listened



Imagine you're trying to help a friend who is feeling anxious or depressed. What part of supporting that friend feels most stressful, difficult, or confusing?



Below is a sampling of the answers provided by Wisconsin high school students.

Summary: Teens worry that they will make things worse when trying to help a friend because they won't say the "right" thing.

Self-Doubt & Fear of Making it Worse

- Worrying they'll get even more depressed/anxious when I talk to them
- Fear of saying the wrong thing or misunderstanding
- Making them feel worse by the things you say
- Fear of not being helpful!
- Are you enough to help them
- Making them feel weird

Initiating / Starting the Conversation

- How to get started
- Knowing if they want space or not
- How do I know if they would be comfortable with me?
- They've opened up, but not enough to be able to follow up.
- The fear they are not telling the truth about being OK
- You don't know exactly what they're going through
- Having to make sure they are OK without feeling like you are intruding on their privacy
- What if they think I'm being nosy or overstepping?
- Knowing how hard to push and when to leave it alone
- Wonder how they will respond

Self-Disclosure

- Relating to them without making it about yourself
- Being honest and relatable/empathetic at the same time
- Trying to show you understand or empathize without making it about yourself
- I like trying to support by sharing my own experiences and how I managed. I'm scared it'll come off self-centered

continued

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Saying the "Right" Thing & Giving Advice



- Saying the right thing
- Not being able to say the right things.
- Knowing what to say and when. That can be difficult.
- Not knowing what to say or how to react.
- Not knowing the right thing to say, so you don't add to it
- Finding the right words without triggering an emotional spot
- Saying things to help them feel better but then saying the wrong things.
- Making sure you say the right thing! But not telling them what they always want to hear!
- Struggling to relate to them and give good advice
- Giving advice that makes them feel worse or unheard
- When to give comfort or advice (making them uncomfortable)
- Making them feel lectured instead of heard

Weight of Being a Helper

- Not actually being able to help
- Feeling like I should have noticed earlier.
- Feeling the pressure of needing to help them
- Feeling as though I haven't done enough to help
 - What if I could've done more?
 - What if I fail and I lose them?
 - When they give up hope in everything
 - Knowing they are struggling and you can only do so much
 - Not being able to help them due to them not accepting help
 - Are you enough to help them
 - Making them feel weird

Misunderstandings

- Fear of not helping or not seeing what they are saying
- Fear of saying the wrong thing or misunderstanding
- They may want a fix right away
- Not understanding their thought process
- When they ask for help but then don't listen when you try to.

When to Seek Adult Support

- Knowing when to talk to an adult/if my ideas are helpful or hurting
- Not knowing when to get other/adults involved. What if I can't help or make it worse?
- Trying to determine when it is time to involve adults

Wisconsin high school youth shared these thoughts at the Mental Wellness Student Leadership Summit 2026 hosted by the Wisconsin Office of Children's Mental Health on April 17, 2026 in Madison.