

Factsheet:

Worried about a family member or friend?

Are you concerned about someone close who seems stressed or low about work? Are they drinking too much, or do you think they may be taking drugs? Whether it's your partner, or a family member or friend, it can seem that there is little you can do to help, especially if they deny that anything is wrong.

You know those close to you best. Are they uncharacteristically:

- ▶ Irritable, short-tempered and angry?
- ▶ Tearful and moody?
- ▶ Withdrawing from normal social interaction, hobbies and friendships?
- ▶ Neglecting personal dress and hygiene?
- ▶ Overreacting when challenged about their behaviour?

Living with someone who is troubled or under stress is difficult. They may seem unpredictable, have dramatic, perhaps violent, mood swings, and their problems may leech into many other areas of life. Their unhappiness is probably having a detrimental personal effect on you. People in mental distress often blame those closest to them for how they are feeling and behaving. This burden of imposed guilt can pull family and friends down too.

How to talk to someone about their mental health

Talking about mental health can be difficult. Some may find it helps to be open, and feel relieved that things are not hidden any more, but they may also experience negative reactions. It's important for people to remember they're not alone, and that many people have mental health problems. You may feel anxious about starting the conversation, but it's important to remember that talking could make all the difference to your friend or family member's mental health.

The conversation could be started with a simple 'How are you?' Offering to make the person a cup of tea, inviting them somewhere private for a chat, or suggesting popping out to a nearby café or for a walk, can all get people talking. Setting aside enough time to talk and switching the phone off are also good things to do in this situation.

Here are some useful tips on how to start that conversation from **Mental Health First Aid England [MHFA]** www.mhfaengland.org.uk

- ▶ Keep the discussion positive and supportive – explore the issues and how to help
- ▶ Be mindful of body language – make sure it's open and non-confrontational
- ▶ Be empathetic and take them seriously
- ▶ Don't be tempted to say things like 'pull yourself together'
- ▶ Ask questions such as 'How are you feeling at the moment?', 'How long have you been feeling like this?', 'Are there any work issues that are contributing to how you are feeling?', and 'Is there anything I can do to help?'
- ▶ Listen carefully, don't interrupt and try to be non-judgmental
- ▶ Be reassuring and signpost them to support such as LawCare or suggest they visit their GP

Supporting someone under stress

Patience is needed when supporting someone under stress, as they are generally impatient and irritable. Let the person know that you recognise that they're under stress, and that you're worried that they're not coping well. Invite them to vent, or talk matters through with you. If they become angry when doing so, take a step back and recognise that it's not you with whom they are upset.

Help them to pinpoint what's stressing them, break it down into small steps, and encourage them to learn some ways to relax. Use positive coping strategies such as making lists of immediate and short-term goals, focusing on the positives, seeking help to get things done, improving relationships and friendships, and physical activity or exercise. You could also remind them that they don't have to be perfect all the time, that they are highly qualified and intelligent, and that worrying or wishful thinking is counterproductive.

Supporting someone with depression

Encourage the person to seek proper medical help. It can be helpful if they write down a full list of symptoms before going to the GP. You could research depression so that you can be more understanding about it, and keep the conversation going, don't shy away from the subject. Listen when they want to talk, and don't ask too many questions.

Encourage your loved one to comply with the doctor's advice, and respect the courage they are showing and the difficult path they are on. Remember to look after yourself too: it can be mentally exhausting supporting someone with depression.

Supporting an addict

Those close to someone addicted to alcohol or drugs are often faced with an impossible situation, where the person's behaviour is disrupting family life. The addict will probably blame everyone else for his or her behaviour, including the family. Families and friends typically go through several stages in their attempts to deal with the addiction.

What can be done?

Addiction is an illness, and the only person who can change their behaviour is the person themselves. They will need support from health and care professionals, self-help organisations and family and friends.

In the meantime you can:

- ▶ **Think about how you are feeling and behaving, and concentrate on your own wellbeing. Don't take responsibility for their wellbeing**
- ▶ **Don't make excuses or apologise for the person. Don't do anything that will make it easier for them to feed their addiction. If it helps, let them know that you are doing this, and why**
- ▶ **Don't make threats unless you are prepared to carry them out**
- ▶ **Only discuss the person's addiction with them when they are sober/clean**
- ▶ **Contact the relevant charity or support group**
- ▶ **Surround yourself with supportive friends and family. Don't be afraid to admit what is going on. They may be aware of the situation and will probably be sympathetic**
- ▶ **Research the availability of treatment and support in your area. Let the person know you have this information**
- ▶ **Look after yourself and enjoy your hobbies and interests**
- ▶ **If you have children, be honest and open with them about what is happening, and why**

Treatment

Most health authorities operate addiction services and clinics, which can be accessed through the GP. These are usually free on the NHS and often involve counselling, group support and drug therapy.

One of the most successful programmes is the 12-step method employed by Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), Narcotics Anonymous (NA), and other treatment centres. AA is free and there are meetings all over the UK.