WHEN YOU’RE WORRIED ABOUT SOMEONE

how to help someone in distress

Stress is a fact of life at MIT. We all try to support each other, but sometimes it’s hard to know when it’s reasonable, even crucial, to suggest that a friend seek help.
WHEN SHOULD I BE WORRIED?

A friend in distress will usually give off clues that they need help. Here are some things to look out for:

- Frequent absence from class or work, especially when this is a change
- Marked decline in academic work or job performance
- Expressions of hopelessness and helplessness in conversations, emails, or postings on social media
- Change in sleeping or eating habits or dramatic weight gain or loss
- Depressed appearance, isolation, or withdrawal
- Apathy or lack of energy
- Excessive anxiety or panic
- Marked changes in personal hygiene, work habits, or social behavior
- Cutting and other self-injurious behaviors
- Alcohol and substance abuse
- Anger, irritability, or interpersonal conflict

Taken alone, any one of these indicators doesn’t necessarily mean that an individual is experiencing severe distress. And some of these clues are more obvious warning signs than others. But regardless of what you observe, if you are feeling worried about someone, never ignore your concerns. Trust your instincts.

WHAT IF IT SEEMS URGENT?

If you believe your friend is thinking about suicide, you should contact a Mental Health clinician right away.

- You can contact MIT Police by dialing 100 on a campus phone, or 617-253-1212 on any other phone. The police can arrange to have the person transported to MIT Medical or to a hospital emergency room.
- You can speak with a Mental Health clinician about an urgent concern any time. We are available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Just dial 617-253-2916 (days) or 617-253-4481 (nights/weekends).
- The Mental Health and Counseling Service has walk-in hours every weekday from 2 to 4 p.m. (Monday–Friday).

HOW TO TALK TO A FRIEND IN DISTRESS

Your friend may resist asking for help. Your friend may resist receiving help. And even if your friend really wants help, he or she may not know how to ask for it or where to find it. Here are some tips for expressing your concerns in a caring, non-judgmental way:

- Be discreet. Find a private, comfortable place to talk in person.
- Don’t judge. Share what you have observed, and explain your concerns honestly, but don’t criticize or offer advice.
- Ask open-ended questions, and listen. Try asking, “How is it going?” Your friend may not answer but may feel relieved to know that you care, are trying to understand, and are offering to help.
- Don’t feel the need to solve the problem. If your friend shares personal feelings with you, you don’t have to offer a solution or opinion. The important thing is to listen and try to understand what the other person is going through.
- Encourage your friend to contact MIT Medical’s Mental Health and Counseling Service or other MIT resources such as Student Support Services (S³). Feel free to share the list of resources in this brochure and discuss the various sources of support on campus.

Feel free to ask us for advice. You can always call the Mental Health and Counseling Service to discuss concerns about a friend or acquaintance. You can share concerns about someone with us without violating medical confidentiality. But we cannot share information about your friend without his or her permission.