



HOW TO INTERACT WITH A FRIEND WHO EXHIBITS PSYCHOLOGICAL STRESS

If you have any **reason to think that a friend is not feeling well (mentally and/emotionally) and is experiencing psychological stress, discuss this with them in a respectful manner**, and demonstrate a **genuinely inquisitive attitude**. If you adopt a judgemental attitude and fire questions at them, chances are they will not be open to talking about it with you. Share your concerns in a way that invites further conversation. For example, you could say:

"I've noticed that you've been a bit withdrawn/upset/irritated/etc. (indicate your concern here) lately. This makes me a little worried about you..."

WHEN SHOULD I WORRY?

When someone is not feeling well (mentally and/or emotionally), you can often notice this in **their statements about their feelings and thoughts and in changes in their behaviour**. For example, individuals who experience high levels of psychological stress will withdraw socially and stop participating in activities that they previously enjoyed. These individuals also often exhibit gloomy moods, changing sleep and eating patterns, have difficulty concentrating, go into fits of crying or rage, will neglect their appearance, exhibit increased alcohol and/or drug use, take irresponsible risks, and exhibit self-harming behaviour. This is often accompanied by statements such as *"I can't take it anymore"*, *"I feel worthless"*, or *"I wish I were dead"*.

The more you notice such behavioural changes and statements in a friend, the more likely it is that they are in distress. So take the above signs seriously and seek help (e.g. by talking to your friend yourself). Do not forget to take care of yourself and talk about this with others.

WHAT DOESN'T WORK?

1. React very intensely: being concerned about a friend involves various emotions (fear, sadness, etc.). However, your friend may interpret such a reaction as you feeling uncomfortable with the situation. This may be a reason for not talking to you about psychological difficulties in the future. Other reactions, such as overanxiousness, can also be destructive. In some cases, these reactions may even intensify the psychological stress.

- 2. Judgemental questioning:** asking questions in an interrogative way (e.g. “Why do you feel this way? / Why don’t you...?”) may give your friend the feeling of being judged and of doing something wrong. Also avoid questions and comments that imply that it is easy to reduce/remove psychological stress (e.g. do not ask people, “Why don’t you just deal with ... in a different way?”).
- 3. Wanting to quickly solve the psychological stress:** although this is always done with good intentions and a desire to help, we know that ‘fixing’ the problem does not help. It may occur to your friend that you do not want to listen to them and/or understand what they are saying. Furthermore, many are not (yet) ready to talk about the psychological stress.

WHAT DOES WORK?

- 1. Use a serene, gentle approach:** this means taking a calm and empathetic approach, without any judgement.
- 2. Respectful curiosity:** asking questions is important, but do so in a respectful way. This is crucial. Demonstrate that you genuinely want to understand how your friend feels. This will help your friend feel more understood. You also help yourself to understand it better.
- 3. Recognise that your friend may not be ready to talk about it:** many people find it difficult to talk about psychological stress because it is still a taboo subject. In this context, it is also possible that your friend is not (yet) prepared to seek professional help.

DO YOU NEED PROFESSIONAL HELP TO BE BETTER EQUIPPED TO ASSIST A FELLOW STUDENT?

**Then be sure to take a look at the websites listed below.
They can help you with this.**

You can contact Awel anonymously (102 or via www.awel.be),
the Suicide Helpline (1813 or via www.zelfmoord1813.be),
the Tele-Onthaal helpline (106 or via www.teleonthaal.be), and Tejo (www.tejo.be).

You can also contact: VUB student psychologists – <https://student.vub.be/studentenpsychologen>,
the Centre for Mental Healthcare (CGG) – <https://www.geestelijkgezondvlaanderen.be/centrum-geestelijke-gezondheidszorg-cgg>,

Youth Centre for General Welfare (JAC) – <http://www.jac.be/>,
Centre for General Welfare (CAW) – <http://www.caw.be/>,
and local Psychologists (social map) – <http://www.desocialekaart.be/>
or <https://www.vind-een-psycholoog.be/>
<https://www.vind-een-psycholoog.be/>