

WHEN A TEENAGER'S FRIEND IS IN CRISIS

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WHEN MUST TEENS INVOLVE ADULTS?

Teenagers usually know that a peer has a significant problem long before adults become aware. Given that adolescents care deeply for their friends, we should remind them of our availability to provide guidance as they support one another. Further, we should explain that they *must* alert an adult to any of the following concerns.

- Self-harm
- High-risk behavior (substance use, reckless driving, etc.)
- Eating disorders
- Depression or suicidality
- Relational violence (at home or with a peer or romantic partner)

HELPING TEENS STAY OUT OF THE ROLE OF THERAPIST

When teenagers are being pulled into a therapeutic role with regard to a peer's serious emotional or safety concerns, adults can help them maintain appropriate boundaries.

We can say, "Be there for your friends when they're having a hard time. But some problems - such as intense anxiety or the possibility of self-harm - should be addressed by a trained professional. When concerns cross that line, your job is to help your friend make sure that he or she connects with the right kind of support."

HOW TO STEP IN WHEN A TEEN SHARES CONCERNS ABOUT A FRIEND

Adolescents are devoted to their friends and often provide one another excellent support. At times, however, teenagers learn that a peer has a problem that requires adult intervention. When a teenager shares delicate information about an agemate, we don't always know how to proceed without making the teenager regret coming forward. We can both address the situation effectively and respect teens' strong sense of loyalty to their peers by following the steps below.

1) Reassure them that they have done the right thing. Teens can worry that it is a breach of trust to tell an adult about a peer's problem. Reassure them that they made the right decision, even if they had been asked to keep the problem a secret. Consider saying, "You were right to let me know. This is what good friends do."

2) Empathize. Warmly acknowledge that the teenager has been dealing with information that may be upsetting for them. Ask something along the lines of, "This is heavy. How long have you been carrying it? And are you okay?"

3) Move forward together. Unless there is an immediate crisis, such as concerns that a peer is suicidal, offer options for how to proceed. You might say, "Your friend's parents need to know so that they can get her help. Do *you* want to be the one to tell them? Do you want to *me* to tell them? Do you want to give your friend the choice of telling them herself, having her folks let us know that she did? Is there an anonymous way you want to do this?"

If the friend's parents ignore the problem, or are the source of the problem, consider suggesting the same options for involving a school counselor or administrator.

4) Ready the teen for resistance. Teens who are leaning on their friends can resist alerting adults to their difficulties. Help the teen who has come to you prepare for this possibility. For example, the teen could say to his or her friend: "Telling me what's going on means that part of you wants help. I'm sticking up for that part of you by making sure you get the support you need and deserve."