



# HELPING FRIENDS AND FAMILY

12 things to try when a  
loved one is struggling

# When it comes to looking after Scotland's mental health, we have a huge role to play as family members and friends.

As a family member or friend you are one of the people who see or speak to your loved ones most regularly. As such, you are likely to be first to notice when they are acting differently. You can pick up when they are not looking after themselves as well as they normally do. You will see things that most other people, including work colleagues, would not see.

This could be because there is something really challenging happening in their life – like work stress, the pressure of job-hunting, or a relationship break-up.

But sometimes it will be because the person is experiencing a mental health problem. This factsheet aims to help you think about your role in looking after the mental health of those around you – through twelve simple ideas.

## **TRY TO BE OPEN TO THE POSSIBILITY....**

We all have mental health; so it's important that we are all open to the possibility that those we are close to will sometimes struggle to maintain their mental health and wellbeing. That's why it is vital to be prepared, open, and ready to talk about mental health. And in learning to look after each other, you can also learn some good ways of looking after your own mental wellbeing.

Some people suffer recurrently from mental health problems over their lifetime, whilst others might experience a single episode of difficulties. Mental health problems might be related directly to life circumstances – for example someone with a difficult job may find that they struggle to manage their stress levels, or a relationship break-up might lead on to a period of depression. Mental health problems can also come about with no known cause and this in itself can be distressing.

Mental health problems can affect every area of your loved one's life – home life, relationships, work and hobbies. You may not have thought about the situation in terms of mental ill-health: you may simply notice small changes, like not washing their hair very often or not having as much to say as usual. This can be the case for the person who is struggling too – they might not be seeing their situation as 'being depressed'. They might just be aware they don't enjoy life nearly as much anymore. In looking after your family and friends, one of the most important messages to be aware of is that recovery from mental health problems is possible and achievable. You can play a vital role in spreading that message while you are looking after those around you.



**Read on  
for twelve  
simple  
ideas you  
can try**



**1**

## **Learn a little bit about mental health:**

It is useful to take a bit of time to find out about the signs and symptoms of common mental health conditions. This helps you understand what behaviour to look out for.

You can find out about a wide range of mental health problems and access some of our publications at [www.samh.org.uk/about-mental-health](http://www.samh.org.uk/about-mental-health)

Whether or not you have concerns just now, it is useful to do a bit of reading online as it could come in useful in future. This will allow you to raise the subject of mental wellbeing from an informed position. You can find a full list of resources at the end of this factsheet, and lots more information at [samh.org.uk/info](http://samh.org.uk/info).

If a loved one's behaviour changes, trust your instincts. It may be that they are struggling with their mental health. The information you find may prove useful now or in the future in raising the issue with them directly.





## 2

# Take a deep breath and think about what not to say:

Once you've identified that you think a loved one is struggling, it is time to think about how to talk to them about what's going on. As well as thinking about what kind of conversation you would like to have with the person you are worried about, it's also important to think objectively about what kind of conversation you **don't** want to have.

Taking a bit of time to think about this objectively can help ensure that the conversation is as open and honest as it can be. It can help to put yourself in the other person's position so that you are able to approach the conversation carefully.

It is also worth self-checking to make sure you aren't going to approach the situation in a way that could seem unhelpful or a bit aggressive. Remember if the person you are concerned about is struggling with their mental health then they may find it really difficult to cope with any criticism or aggression at all. Often family members and friends will focus on the things they are concerned about (a messy house or lack of effort with finding a job) rather than the person inside and this might feel a bit like 'an attack'.

Try to avoid the easy mistake of thinking that commenting on someone's changed behaviour is the same as 'opening the door' to them sharing their feelings with you. And try to avoid comments that will make the person feel guilty or worsen their mood or sense of self-esteem.

Consider how you might feel if you were feeling low and someone said:

**Are you down in the dumps again? I wish you could snap out of it.**

**You need to get your act together! You've been lazing around and relying on other people for months.**

**Pull yourself together – you are so unpredictable these days.**

**You seem like you're off in your own world again. You didn't used to be like this.**

Aside from avoiding this kind of opener, remember that if you want to talk properly, it's important to avoid starting a conversation when there are too many other distractions. Asking about someone's mental wellbeing with Eastenders blaring in the background probably won't work very well.

And when starting a conversation, be clear with yourself from the outset that you will avoid mixing concern and criticism if at all possible. You want to find out **why** the person feels things are not going right at the moment – not simply remind them of the problems they are facing as they appear to you.

Don't speak too quickly or frantically. If someone is feeling depressed, for example, they may find it difficult to process information quickly and might misinterpret your speed as aggression. You need to give them positive affirmation through speaking to them – to start by letting them know you are there to listen and that you care.

*If the person you are concerned about is struggling with their mental health then they may find it really difficult to cope with any criticism.*



### 3

## Prepare to ask how things are – and to listen genuinely to the response

It's important not to be afraid of speaking to your friends and family about their mental wellbeing. Speak to them normally, remembering that you know them well and are well-placed to notice when things are not right. Here are some tips to help.

**Choose a place and time when you will be able to talk privately.**

**Start with a simple question:**

*"How are things with you just now?"*

*"You seem to be struggling at the moment?"*

*"We don't need to talk right now, but I'm here"*

**Make clear you are asking about the person and their wellbeing** and not talking about everyday things or asking for a progress report on their day-to-day life.

Remember if the person is struggling with day-to-day life this could feel like 'an attack'.

**Speak slowly and calmly, in a low and private tone of voice.**

Show with your body language that you are open to hearing what they have to say.

Try: *"Take your time"* or *"I'm listening"*

**Remember that the most important thing is to create the space to hear what is going on for the person you are concerned about.**

Give plenty of time and space for the person to speak with you – remembering they may need extra time if they are struggling or find it difficult to share their feelings.

Remember too that allowing silences to develop will show that you are listening.

**Keep things objective** – talk about what patterns of behaviour you've noticed or reflect back what you've heard them tell you.

*"Yes, I've noticed you haven't been calling people lately."*

*"It sounds like you are feeling really terrible/sad/hopeless at the moment"*

**Once you have started talking, try not to interrupt too much or dismiss concerns.**

Control the natural tendency to rationalise or over-rationalise what you hear if you can. If you tell the person you're concerned about exactly what you think they should do to start feeling better, for example, this might be too much for them and might make them feel you are trying to take over their situation or trivialise the issues they are struggling with.

**Keep your cool** if you can, even if what you hear worries, angers, upsets or scares you. But remember no-one is super-human and it is completely acceptable to feel distressed and angry at the same time as supporting someone.

**Let the person you are concerned about manage the situation themselves** – asking open questions to help them doing this.

*"What would you like to do from here?"*

*"Is there anything you feel you could tackle just now?"*

*"Do you feel able to phone up the doctor for an appointment?"*

*"Would you like me to help?"*

**Try to make at least one agreement together about the way forward** – no matter how small the step forward seems.

Really meaningful steps towards improved mental wellbeing need to come from the person who is struggling.

There might also be things that you can do to help.

**Give reassurance that you will continue to listen and help** and agree when you will talk about the situation again.

## 4

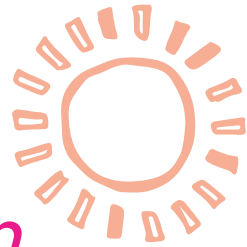
# Avoid diagnosing

Remember that if you do find information on mental health conditions and symptoms that seem to apply to someone you know, it's important not to 'diagnose' them. Think carefully about whether to show them the information directly or simply tell them the symptoms you have noticed and ask them to speak to the GP, bearing in mind that the person might not actually be conscious of some of the symptoms that you notice.

If you think the person that you are worried about might respond reasonably well to seeing some information on mental health conditions and symptoms then:

- Show them what you have found
- Try to give them information on a range of conditions rather than appear to be trying to 'diagnose' them
- Ask them what they think and if they notice the same symptoms you do
- Respect it if they don't want to pursue a diagnosis just now
- If you think they might want to get information on their symptoms independently, direct them to the [SAMH website](#).
- Always emphasise that to get a proper diagnosis they should speak to their GP.

When you discuss mental health conditions and symptoms, it is really useful if you can spread the message that there is no shame in experiencing mental health issues – named or unnamed. It is also important to emphasise that recovery – or an improvement in mental wellbeing – is always possible and that routes to recovery can include medical treatments (talking therapies, medications), support and activities in the community, as well as personal lifestyle changes.



*Recovery – or an improvement in mental wellbeing – is always possible*



**5**

## **Signpost your loved one to SAMH**

The SAMH Information Service provides information and signposting for pathways to better mental health and wellbeing over the phone, through emails, and through a range of online information. It is a great place to start if you have questions or are seeking support.

If your loved one doesn't feel comfortable getting in contact, you can do this on their behalf.

The SAMH Infoline and email service is open from 9am to 6pm, Monday to Friday, except on Bank Holidays. Phone calls from UK landlines are charged at local rates. Charges from mobile telephones vary considerably. You can dial the service direct on 0344 800 0550, or email [info@samh.org.uk](mailto:info@samh.org.uk).

**6**

## **Do what you can to help**

Every time you create time to speak to the person that you're worried about, you will be hoping to give them the encouragement to identify one or two things which they can do to start improving their mental wellbeing. While it is important that the person takes independent steps towards wellbeing, you could offer to do any number of apparently 'small' things which could help significantly..

Try working through our checklist below for inspiration. Print the page off and speak to the person you're concerned about and ask what might help. Or if the person is really low – be more clear about what you can do to help. This is not about running their life for them – but instead is about giving them the help and support to kick-start their natural instinct for looking after their own wellbeing. Discuss this with the person you're worried about, using the check-list to mark any ideas the person feels would be useful. Use the last section to note anything else you agree together to do.

You might need to help out just a few times, or you might find that over a period of time it helps considerably if you do something special to help every few weeks or every few months.

## What I can do to help.....

<p>Give a heart-felt hug when you meet even if you wouldn't usually do that.</p>	<p>Plan a road or rail trip to somewhere new together.</p>	<p>For immediate family, agree to go to bed at the same time every night to help get plenty of sleep.</p>	<p>Print out <a href="#">SAMH's five ways to better wellbeing</a> and try to do one of these each day.</p>
<p>Give the person you're worried about a new diary to keep their thoughts in.</p>	<p>Find out what life skills courses and support services there are in your area: often people can refer themselves to these courses, without a GP referral.</p>	<p>Make a playlist of relaxing music on Spotify.</p>	<p>Help tidy up the house and create a calm space in the home.</p>
<p>Look at some old photographs, chat, and create a photograph album.</p>		<p>Go along to the GP together to help explain the situation.</p>	<p>Sit down with the person you're worried about and give support in organising their finances – for example, opening letters and paying unpaid bills.</p>
<p>Help to set up online shopping to get healthy and nutritious food delivered easily.</p>	<p>Help plan the week's activities in a diary or calendar – and discuss prioritising all the things that need done.</p>	<p>Start a practical or craft project together – woodwork, baking or photography for example.</p>	
<p>Give some help with writing or proofreading employment or benefits applications if this is a hurdle.</p>	<p>Make a batch of meals together to freeze for the coming fortnight together.</p>	<p>Use the <a href="#">wellbeing assessment tool</a> on the SAMH website to track mood over time.</p>	<p>Look for services offering job-search support in the area if they are looking for a job.</p>
<p>Phone or email the SAMH Information Service to find out about services and support available locally.</p>			<p>Find out about mindfulness or alternative therapies options in your area or online – help by booking an appointment or going along together.</p>



*Print out and chat through together.....*

<p>Help them prepare to speak to the GP and ask for a referral to the Community Mental Health Team – or go along together to explain day-to-day difficulties.</p>	<p>Agree to switch off the TV and take time away from social media at certain times to allow more time for talking.</p>	<p>Make a list together of outstanding jobs in day-to-day life that need sorted out.</p>	
<p>Buy the person a subscription to an online wellbeing service like Calm or Headspace.</p>	<p>Look at online mental wellbeing resources together.</p>	<p>Suggest writing each other letters, which might be an easier way to express feelings.</p>	<p>Help organise a close gathering of friends at your house or theirs.</p>
<p>If they have children, offer to babysit to allow them some time to themselves.</p>	<p>Go for a spa treatment together.</p>	<p>Visit an area of natural beauty together.</p>	<p>If you don't live near each other, arrange to keep in touch over video call, for example through WhatsApp Video or Zoom.</p>

*What we have agreed I'll do to help...*

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

.....

## 7

### Suggest tracking feelings and symptoms each day:

When someone is struggling with their mental health, it can be hard to get the perspective to fully understand what is wrong and how they can put it right. If someone is depressed, for example, they can feel like they are in a kind of tunnel which is negative and hopeless.

Encouraging your loved one to keep track of how they are doing day-to-day might help them to build up really valuable self-knowledge that could be the key to their recovery. By actively tracking their mood in a diary or with an online mood-tracking tool, this could help them take a step from 'passive' experience of mental health issues, to a more 'active' position in terms becoming self-aware about their difficulties and actively trying to take positive steps to get their mental wellbeing back.

Diaries and mood-tracking tools can also help to articulate what is going on to a doctor

or psychiatrist. Suggest that your loved one takes along a diary or mood calendar to their GP appointment where they are trying to explain the mental health problems they are experiencing.

There are many mood diaries freely available, such as [this one from Bipolar UK](#).

## 8

### Give support in getting professional help

Going to see the doctor can be a huge step towards recovery, but can also be a very difficult process as for many people it means admitting there is an issue and dealing with the fear of being judged or not believed or understood.

Sometimes people are not sure exactly how their doctor can help or they may be resistant to going to the doctor because they are sure they don't want to try particular treatments. They may feel firmly against the idea of becoming dependent on medications; or they may feel that counselling or other talking therapies are pointless and won't help.

Speaking to the GP can help to access treatment – and can help make the doctor aware of how things are just now in case the situation gets worse over time.

Place the ball in their court – the important thing is that they make the decisions if possible, and that they feel supported. If you offer to attend a GP's appointment with the person, it might be helpful to say why you think it would be useful for you to be there. For example, is your offer purely for moral support? Or are there certain symptoms or behaviours which you think you might be able to describe to the GP which the person themselves might struggle with or avoid? If so, say what these are and how you would describe them if you were to go along.

Find out more about [preparing for a GP appointment](#) on the SAMH website.



You can:

- Suggest they ask for a double appointment to allow more time to talk
- Suggest they write a list of things of the issues they want to discuss
- Ask if they would like to practice what they will say to the doctor with you, or on their own if they would feel more comfortable
- Suggest keeping a diary of how they are feeling day-to-day, noting any significant situations or relationships that are contributing to how they are feeling
- Offer to attend the appointment with them.

## 9

# Help your loved one stay connected

If your loved one is struggling with their mental health, don't wait for them to make the first move. Losing touch with people is a common symptom of poor mental health. Sending a text, email or message is a good way to keep in touch day-to-day to keep up support without being intrusive. Some people get more personally and emotionally from a phone or video-call or face-to-face meeting – which are the things someone might avoid if they are feeling low.

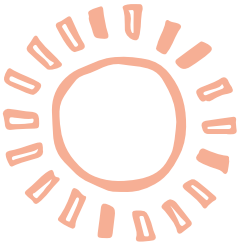
Keep up the momentum by trying not to give up on making phone calls, even if the person often doesn't answer. It might be helpful to agree a regular time that you will call each day or week so that the contact is expected. Consider getting friends or family together in a safe and welcoming environment if you think the person is struggling with meeting up with people face-to-face. And remember that in addition to talking on the phone you can get free video calls online through Skype, FaceTime or Zoom if everyone has internet access.. Seeing each other's faces can make a big difference and can remind someone who is struggling that they are loved and supported even if you are far away.

Remember that communicating and connecting socially can be one of the most challenging aspects of suffering from a mental health problem – and persevere as it is likely that things will improve over time.

Another way you can help the person stay connected is to help them explore local support options. Services will vary from area to area, but it's useful to remember that the things that help will not always be specifically for people with mental health issues. Exercise can help, as can reading focussed on wellbeing ('bibliotherapy'). For meeting new people, Meet Up groups exist in many towns in Scotland to bring together people with mutual interests. And befriending schemes are often available for those struggling with their mental health, as well as 'outreach' support where you are visited in your own home or in the local area, and day centres for those who need support in re-establishing a daily routine.

To learn more about what is available in your area, call the SAMH Information Service for some starting points.





10

## Talk about stories of mental health recovery

Experiencing mental health problems can make it overwhelming and painful to look toward the future. Recovery from mental health problems is possible and likely, but often people are not aware of this and talking about it can give them hope.

You can find a selection of stories from people who have recovered from a mental health problem, or supported a loved one to recover, on the [SAMH website](#).

11

## Be suicide-aware

For some people suicidal thoughts are just that – thoughts and ideas which run through their mind at times with no direct intention of attempting suicide. For others there can be a deep sense of despair and loss which leads to contemplating suicide as something which they do intend to actively try. Suicidal thoughts are much more common than suicide attempts. If you have any concerns about whether your loved one is thinking about suicide – ask them directly.

SAMH has [information about suicide](#) on their website as well as resources that you might find useful, such as the '[Suicide... How to Ask?](#)' card and '[Suicide...Are you worried about someone?](#)'

*“You hope there will be a quick fix – the doctor will prescribe you something, and that’s it, but of course that’s not the case. I was finding the antidepressants on their own did nothing – I had to bring it all together. Eat a bit better, sleep a bit better, exercise more; and then I saw an improvement. Everyone is different, and you just need to try and hope that you find your way out of it. I know it’s tough but you can get there – if you want to help yourself.”*

*Michael*



## 12

### **Give affirmation to your loved one – and look after yourself!**

When you are struggling with your mental health it's good to be given some affirmation by those around you to help keep you moving forward.

You may be frustrated and worried about the situation the person is in, but consider what honest encouragement you can give.

*“You are still the same person we all know and love. Your sense of humour hasn't gone anywhere!”*

*“I think you are really brave for the way that you are dealing with this.”*

*“Remember all the things you are good at – making friends and making people laugh for a start.”*

One of the most difficult things when you are supporting someone who is struggling with their mental health is to listen to what can feel like the same story many times over. Try to listen out for small changes in how the person is feeling and keep your ears 'fresh' for listening. If you notice when small improvements are made and feed this back then you can share in these small steps to recovery together.

Be realistic with yourself about how much you can do to help – no one person can do everything that's needed to help someone recover from a mental health issue. Recovery is individual and personal, and no one person will be able to 'fix everything' for the person that is struggling.

If you find that you are spending a good deal of your time regularly looking after someone with mental health issues – then you may start to consider yourself to be a 'carer'. Being a carer brings with it certain rights and entitlements as well as a range of support options. For more information on support as a carer, check out [Carers UK](#).

You can also read [SAMH's How To Cope When Supporting Someone Else](#).

While you are supporting your loved ones through mental health problems, and encouraging them to take pro-active steps towards wellbeing, be kind to yourself – remember that simply being there through the problems, ready and willing to listen and help where you can, will probably be deeply appreciated by your loved one. Someone who is struggling with their mental health may not be in the right place to say how much your support means to them at the time – but it is likely it will mean a huge amount to them and play a significant role in their recovery.

If the strain of supporting someone starts to get to you, then remember that all the same support is there for you to find out about and use – confidential helplines, GP support, counselling and online wellbeing programmes.

## Key Contacts and Resources.....

### **SAMH INFORMATION SERVICE**

For more information, call SAMH Information Service on 0344 800 0550 or email [info@samh.org.uk](mailto:info@samh.org.uk). The service is open from 9am to 6pm, Monday to Friday. It is closed on Bank Holidays. The SAMH Information Service provides information and signposting around mental health and can provide information on both national and local resources.

### **BREATHING SPACE**

**T: 0800 83 85 87**

**W: [breathingspace.scot](http://breathingspace.scot)**

Confidential out of office hours telephone line for people experiencing low mood, depression or anxiety.

### **BRITISH ASSOCIATION FOR COUNSELLING AND PSYCHOTHERAPY (BACP)**

**T: 01455 883 300**

**W: [bacp.co.uk](http://bacp.co.uk)**

Information about counselling and psychotherapy, and details of local therapists.

### **CARERS TRUST SCOTLAND**

**T: 0300 772 7701**

**W: [carers.org/country/carers-trustscotland](http://carers.org/country/carers-trustscotland)**

Information and advice on all aspects of caring.

### **CITIZENS ADVICE SCOTLAND**

**T: 0808 800 9060**

**W: [cas.org.uk](http://cas.org.uk)**

Advice on legal issues, money and other problems.

### **COSCA (COUNSELLING & PSYCHOTHERAPY IN SCOTLAND)**

**T: 01786 475140**

**W: [cosca.org.uk](http://cosca.org.uk)**

To find a counsellor or psychotherapist

### **GIVE US A SHOUT**

**T: 85258 (text only)**

**W: [giveusashout.org](http://giveusashout.org)**

24/7 crisis text line.

### **MENTAL WELFARE COMMISSION SCOTLAND**

**T: 0800 389 6809**

Service users and carers line

**W: [mwscot.org.uk](http://mwscot.org.uk)**

Offers advice and guidance on mental health care and treatment.

### **NHS CHOICES: CARERS DIRECT**

**T: 0300 123 1053**

**W: [nhs.uk/carersdirect](http://nhs.uk/carersdirect)**

Information from the NHS on support available to carers.

### **ROYAL COLLEGE OF PSYCHIATRISTS**

**W: [rcpsych.ac.uk](http://rcpsych.ac.uk)**

Advice and information to improve the lives of people with mental illness.

### **SAMARITANS**

**T: 116 123**

**E: [jo@samaritans.org](mailto:jo@samaritans.org)**

**W: [samaritans.org](http://samaritans.org)**

Freepost: RSRB-KKBY-CYJK, Chris, PO Box 9090, Stirling, FK8 2SA

A 24-hour free telephone helpline.

### **SEE ME**

**W: [seemescotland.org](http://seemescotland.org)**

National programme to tackle mental health stigma and discrimination.

### **SCOTTISH INTERCOLLEGIATE GUIDELINES NETWORK (SIGN)**

**T: 0131 623 4720**

**W: [sign.ac.uk](http://sign.ac.uk)**

Evidence-based clinical practice guidelines for the NHS in Scotland.

### **SHARED CARE SCOTLAND**

**T: 01383 622 462**

**W: [sharedcarescotland.org.uk](http://sharedcarescotland.org.uk)**

Charitable organisation that offers advice and assistance to access short breaks and respite care for those that are cared for and their carers.

### **TURN2US**

**W: [turn2us.org.uk](http://turn2us.org.uk)**

A national charity that helps people in financial hardship gain access to welfare benefits, charitable grants and support services.



Since 1923, SAMH has represented the voice of people affected by mental health problems in Scotland. We are here to provide help, information and support.

Follow us on Twitter: @SAMHtweets

Follow us on Facebook: facebook.com/SAMHmentalhealth

Follow us on Instagram: @samhscotland

**[samh.org.uk](http://samh.org.uk)**



SAMH is Scottish Action for Mental Health. Scottish Charity: No. SC-008897  
Registered Office: Brunswick House, 51 Wilson Street, Glasgow, G1 1UZ