



How to help **WITHOUT ADDING STRESS**



batyr & The Happiness Institute
Parent/Carer guide

Who is this guide for?

This guide has been created for the batyr community; for all parents and carers who are looking to support young people with experiences of mental ill-health.

We understand that it can be tough for parents and carers who want to support their young person but may not have the tools or the confidence to do so.

This guide has been created by leading positive psychologist Dr. Tim Sharp AKA Dr. Happy from The Happiness Institute in collaboration with batyr.

Firstly, just reading this is a great start!

The fact you want to help is an indication that you're a caring and thoughtful parent/carer.

The realisation that you don't want to cause any additional stress is one that might seem obvious to you, however, in reality it shows a great amount of awareness.



So let's get stuck in!



A good place to start is by taking the approach of 'do no harm' meaning, at the very least, let's not make things worse. However, it's important to note we shouldn't allow our fears of getting things wrong, or even of possibly upsetting your child/young person, to stop us from trying to help. If your child/ young person feels some degree of stress in response to something you've done, it doesn't necessarily mean it was your fault or that you did the wrong thing. It's just a reality of life and, although you naturally will want to avoid that situation, sometimes it's unavoidable. You should approach the topic seeking to do no harm, whilst ensuring you're realistic. Given the nature of the conversation, the reality is that we may upset our child/young person in the process of trying to help. It almost goes without saying that wanting to help is a good thing; it's something every parent/carer can understand and has tried to do at some point. Before we continue, pause for a minute to consider that **what YOU want to do might not always be what your child/young person wants you to do.**

It's very possible that your child/young person might not want your 'help'. Alternatively, they might want a different type of help to what you're able to or prepared to offer. They might even want help from a different person, and NOT from you! If that's the case, it's important to try NOT to take this personally. If the primary focus is helping your child/young person then we need, at least in the short term, to put aside ego or any other obstacles and allow anyone to help in any way. Remember, help can mean different things to different people. You might think your child/ young person needs help to do something or to do something differently, to change some aspect of their life or to solve some problem. And you may well even think you know exactly what the thing or change or solution is!

However, sometimes they might just want you to be there; to be present and to listen. **There are times when being heard is just as important, if not more important than having a problem solved.** There will almost certainly be times when your child won't know what they want, or they won't be able to express what they want. In either case, regardless of whether or not a solution exists for the problem they're facing, knowing someone is present and willing to listen can still be extremely beneficial and even therapeutic.

Taking this all into account, even if your child/young person can ask for and accept your help, even if you're able to solve their problem or alleviate whatever stress they might be experiencing, they won't always say thank you or even acknowledge your actions with any sort of gratitude. They might, and if they do that's great, but for a variety of reasons this can sometimes be beyond the abilities of a distressed teenager or young adult. If this is the case it's important to try NOT to take things personally.

Time to get PRACTICAL!

#1 Just be there!

This can sound vague and clichéd, but it really is very important! Let's look at what it actually involves.

- **Be physically near them if you can**

That is, being in the same room as them; sitting or standing close to them; literally being where they can see you and feel their presence. Teenagers definitely need their own space and some privacy. So the challenge here is in balancing these needs with the desire to let them know you're available if and when they want you.

- **Be supportive**

As well as physical proximity, the goal is to also communicate love and support and be compassionate and caring. This can be done verbally and non-verbally; you can openly tell your child that you love them and want to help them, but you can also convey such sentiments by being quiet and calm, by listening actively and by reassuring them that whatever they say or do you won't judge them.

- **Pay attention and be present**

Being present in an accepting way is harder than it might seem. It requires a willingness to pay full attention, to NOT check your phone or allow anything else to distract you from the task at hand. Being present is a skill that many of us need to practice more, the good news is that practice definitely makes things (if not perfect) better.

#2 Ask what they want or need

As noted earlier, your child/young person might not always want what you think they need. Even if you're right, this isn't about you, it's about them! Once you've achieved presence the next step is to work towards achieving a degree of consensus. Ask your child/young person what (if anything) they'd like from you.

Here are some examples of things you could suggest to them:

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| • To just be or sit with them | • To enlist the support or assistance of someone else |
| • To listen | • Or something else entirely |
| • To help problem solve | |

Once you've decided on a goal try as best you can to stay focused on this. It's easy to get distracted and it can be easy to slip into problem solving mode even if this isn't what your child/young person wants. Keep re-focusing as often as you need to bring it back to the original goal.

As you continue supporting your child/young person, their needs might change. If you think this is the case, then ... ask them again! Try not to assume that just because you think the agenda's changed that they also feel the same. If you'd like, go back to the beginning and ask your child/young person what they need from you now. Remember, it's what THEY want that's important (not what you think they want or what you want).

#3 Keep at it and be patient

Don't rush things! Even though you might have other things to do (you almost certainly do) or other places to be (you may well have other demands on your time, like other children) try not to be in a hurry. Expressing distress or solving problems don't usually stick to nice, convenient timings.

Once again, there's no doubt this is hard and you shouldn't feel bad about feeling impatient (it's normal) but try, just try as best you can to stay present, focused and on task, whatever that might be and/or require.

What might that look like?

If you're concerned...

Ask something simple like "R U OK?" No doubt you've heard this question before and there's no doubt it's a great place to start. At the same time, it is easy for someone (especially a younger person who might be reluctant to speak or is having difficulty expressing themselves anyway) to just respond with a "yes" or "no". For this reason it might be more helpful to make a more specific observation, such as:



"I've noticed
(describe a specific
behaviour) lately; is
everything OK?"

"You don't seem to be
quite yourself this last
week or two; is there
anything you want to
talk about?"

The best advice here is to pinpoint something specific and to focus on a specific behaviour or change in behaviour. Then without judgement or accusation just note that you're concerned and open up the conversation.

If you're trying to listen and convey understanding...

Practice what's known as "active listening". This requires a genuine desire to listen, to really listen, and then a willingness to express that desire to listen via certain specific behaviours and responses that let the other person know you're trying to hear them. Some of these behaviours are summarising what you think you've heard and checking, reflecting back what you think you've heard and again, checking. Active listening is all about communicating your interest AND ensuring that what you think you're hearing is actually what the other person is saying.

If you're trying to help solve a problem...

Try to avoid going straight to the solution, even if you think you know what the answer would be. Instead, work collaboratively with your child/ young person to go through the following steps:

1. Define the issue as best you can
2. Generate as many possible solutions as you can
3. Weigh up the pros and cons of each solution
4. Determine the solution most likely to be applicable and/or succeed
5. Work out an action plan that can be tested and then assessed.

It can be far more powerful if your child/young person can come up with the solutions, rather than you giving them to them.. You've probably heard the famous saying, which is very relevant here, "you can give a man a fish and he'll eat for a day; or teach him how to fish and he'll eat forever!"

If you think your child needs professional help...

Don't be afraid to suggest this. If your child is reluctant, you can frame it as being no different to seeing any other expert such as a GP, dentist, tutor or even a sport's coach. Mental health professionals, like clinical psychologists, are just experts in human behaviour and emotions, so seeing one is no different to seeing any other specialist. If you're not sure what's "normal", please see the "How to know when "normal" becomes "abnormal" (or unhealthy)" tip sheet.

And after the fact...

Whichever of these options you've chosen and tried to apply, make sure you follow up with actions and then make sure you follow up your actions with a review. Although it's often said that "it's the thought that counts", **it's more helpful to understand that "actions speak louder than words"**.

So, if you've said you love and support your child, make sure your behaviours are consistent with this and show them you care! If you've said you'll help in some way, make sure you actually do what you've promised. If you've agreed to trial something or allow your child to trial an approach, allow enough time to determine how effective it has been and then check back in.

Ideally, you might like to follow the well-worn business motto of "what doesn't get measured doesn't get done" or the flip side which is about setting specific and measurable goals to maximise successful outcomes. This is no different. Work with your child to determine what a desirable outcome or what "success" would look like? How would you/they know if there was a positive outcome? What will you both do if this is reached? Or if it's not?

The point here is that "helping" your child is not a one-off activity; it's ongoing. The effort you make shouldn't really ever start or finish. These are long term strategies and what they look like may change over time; thinking about them like this is also a useful way to help your child grow into the person you and they want them to be.

And finally...

It almost goes without saying that along the way, no matter how hard you try and no matter how good your intentions, you'll almost certainly make a few (or many!) mistakes. When (not if; because if you're not making mistakes you're probably not trying) you get it wrong, apologise and move on. Don't beat yourself up. Parenting is difficult, we don't get any training in it and just when we think we're getting the hang of it our kids go and change on us!

One thing that can really help is to aim for "good enough" parenting; don't even think about perfect parenting. "Good enough" parenting is exactly as it sounds; it's good or adequate, satisfactory and acceptable. These are all achievable standards but too often we set ourselves up for failure with unrealistic expectations built around assumptions of what non-existent super-parents would be or do.

One more thing! Always remember that you can't control how your child will respond to your attempts to help. Whether or not they take up your offers of help; whether or not they get upset or stressed, these are things over which you have no control. Focus on just doing your best; with good intentions; and building on values such as love and compassion. Whilst doing so, remember to try to focus as much as you can on what you can control, to accept what you can't control, and to work towards being wise enough to know the difference.

Getting help

Mental Health Line

1800 011 511

The NSW Mental Health Line is a 24-hour state-wide telephone number which puts you in touch with your local mental health service. Staffed by mental health professionals, the line gives NSW residents access to expert mental health advice, support and referrals for people dealing with a mental health problem and their families and carers.



Lifeline provides access to crisis support, suicide prevention and mental health services.

13 11 14
www.lifeline.org.au



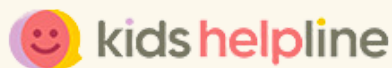
Counselling services and support for carers, including peer support groups, online training and counselling.

1800 422 737
Carergateway.gov.au



Headspace is the national youth mental health foundation. It helps young people who are going through a tough time.

www.headspace.org.au



Kids Helpline is Australia's only free, private and confidential, phone counselling service specifically for young people aged between five and twenty-five.

1800 55 1800
www.kidshelpline.com.au



Dedicated to bringing about change to the culture, policy and practice in the prevention, treatment and support of those affected by eating disorders and negative body image.

thebutterflyfoundation.org.au



Beyond Blue is an organisation working to increase awareness and understanding of depression, anxiety and related substance-use issues around Australia.

www.beyondblue.org.au



The Black Dog Institute is a world leader in the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of mood disorders such as depression and bipolar.

www.blackdoginstitute.org.au



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www.psychology.org.au/FindAPsychologist



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