

# #FriendsTalk

A guide to being there  
for your friends when  
they need to talk  
about anxiety



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## What is #FriendsTalk?

Thank you for downloading this factsheet. The aim of this quick guide is to give you the confidence to offer your friends the option to call you if they ever need to talk about their anxiety. To help your friends follow these simple steps:

1

Step 1. Read this fact sheet and familiarise yourself with the basics.

2

Step 2. Post our #FriendsTalk poster on your FB page to let your friends know you're ready if they want to talk about anxiety.

3

Step 3. When your friends call, follow the guidance on our factsheet and make a real difference.



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## Why is this necessary?

A good friend is someone we can share good times with. But, just as importantly, they're someone we can share bad times with too. Most of us appreciate that being there when things are tough is an important part of being a friend.

But how many times have you found out after the event that your friend was struggling with something and wished they'd talked to you about it at the time? It's natural for us to want to be there for our friends.

The issue is that often your friends don't want to be a burden. They may think you only want to be there for the positive things in their life. They may not want to bring you down and make you feel bad.

This is especially true for anxiety sufferers who often feel embarrassed about having the problem they have and may not feel confident that their problems are important enough to bother you with.

So, this campaign is here to give you the confidence and the basics to take a call about anxiety as well as letting your friends know you're prepared, available and care.



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## Anxiety: The Basics

Anxiety is a useful emotion. When we're making decisions and remembering to carry out important tasks it serves as a useful guide to what's important and what to avoid.

As an example, when you have an important bill to pay, it's helpful that you get a bad feeling when you think about not paying the bill. That's anxiety. In your mind you probably run through what will happen if you don't pay it, imagine the late fees and the look on your partner's face and the bad feeling all of that causes helps you to create a powerful memory. This allows our minds to prioritise and remember important things.

In many other ways, it keeps us safe by encouraging us to avoid unnecessary risks and

helps us prepare for danger by getting us physically ready to take action.

But for somebody with an anxiety disorder that system doesn't work as well as it might. They may experience high levels of fear in situations that don't appear to others to be risky. They may make a decision about something only to have a nagging worry continue to push that decision back into their mind for endless reconsideration. They may begin to avoid situations that provoke their anxiety which can make their behaviour seem odd or even hostile.

Anxiety manifests itself in lots of different ways and causes many problems. It's not necessary for you to



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## Anxiety: The Basics

understand all the different ways anxiety comes about or the effect that it has in order to be able to listen to and support a friend.

What matters is that you know it's a faulty working of their fear system that makes some things seem more threatening to them and that the systems that calm that fear in other people don't work effectively. That's why the things that may work for you to cope with threatening situations may not work for your friend. It's not that they're not trying to cope. It's that their coping system is broken.

Now scroll down to explore our ten top tips...



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## Listening and understanding

### 1. Listen and be patient whilst they explain what their experience is like

Most of what you're going to do to support your friend is listening.

If your mind goes blank and you forget everything else in this list then just make sure they're doing most of the talking and stay on the phone for a reasonable chunk of time (maybe limit the call to an hour so you're not having to take too much on at once?) or until they've said everything that they want to say.

I guarantee that will have been such a novel experience for them. And it will have been incredibly reassuring just to know someone cares enough and is interested in them

enough to stay on the phone and listen.

### 2. Let them know you understand how their world looks

Try to suspend your own logic and the way you see the world and see how the world looks to your friend. They may be fearful of things that seem totally harmless to you. Or they maybe fixating on things which feel irrelevant to you.

You may feel like you have a clear picture of where they're going wrong and what they need to do about it. Other people's problems can seem much easier to fix than our own because the emotions we have are not attached to them. But please resist the urge to fix and advise. Instead



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concentrate on how the world looks to them. If they tell you the things they're worried about just believe that they are important and let them know that you understand. For example you could say something like:

'So you're worried about work. You're worried you'll get fired and then you're worried that will cause you to lose the house. I can see why you're struggling to sleep. That makes total sense.'

### 3. Let them know they're not going through this alone

So you've listened. You've let them know you understand the way the world looks to them. Now may be a good time to remind them that, whilst you don't have the answers to

their problems, you are there for them. Let them know that they don't have to go through this alone.

### 4. Remind them of the qualities you admire in them

Throughout the call (and throughout your friendship) it's always a good idea to be on the lookout for opportunities to remind your friend of the things they do well. They may be thoughtful, kind, persistent, honest or humorous. Try to be creative about ways to let them know. Here's an example:

'I'm just thinking about what you said about feeling guilty for letting people down. I'm sorry you feel that way. It sounds tough. But I always think of you as being really



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dependable. I can think of loads of times when other people have backed out of things and you've stayed the course. What about when we arranged Sally's birthday and we were the only ones who showed up? When you say you'll be somewhere I know you'll be there.'

### 5. Ask them what they'd like from you

We'll cover some suggestions for what to do next or further help you can offer in number nine. Whilst it's useful to have ideas for how to help it's most important that you first ask your friend what support they'd like from you. They may not be ready to take practical steps yet. They may still be contemplating their condition and what it means to them.

They may need time to build up the courage to make some changes they know they need to make. So it's useful to ask them what help they'd like and trust their judgement about where they are and what they'd like from you. Just knowing you're there and willing will be a great boost to them.



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## Taking care of yourself

### 6. There are limits to friendship

Being available to listen and support someone is a kind thing to do. But it's important to keep in mind the limits of your friendship.

You may be available to meet up in person for a coffee on a regular basis. You may feel able to attend further appointments with them at their GP. But what if they ask if they can move in, borrow a large sum of money or get you to look after their kids/pets whilst they go abroad? That may be fine or it may feel like too much.

It's OK to say 'no' (or 'I'll have to think about it' whilst you give yourself time to decide) if they're asking for

something that makes you feel uncomfortable. Being available to listen and support is not a commitment to taking responsibility for fixing the problems in their life.

### 7. Is there someone you can speak to if you're feeling overwhelmed?

Professional therapists all have a supervisor with whom they can speak if they find a session difficult to process.

Do you have a partner or friend that you could talk to if you're upset or disturbed by something that comes up on the call? It's important not to broadcast the the specifics of your friend's difficulties (you're supporting them not mining them for gossip) to others. But you can let



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## Taking care of yourself

someone know the impact it's had and that you need to talk without giving away any details. For example:

“Hi Sarah. I just need to talk. I've been talking to my

friend about her awful work situation and it's got me down. I feel helpless. What do you do when your friends are struggling?”



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## Stuck for ideas or where to go next?

### 8. Listening is the most important thing you can do

If you're feeling like you need to do more to help that's natural. If you're a practical person who responds to problems with solutions it can be very hard to stand by and hear that someone you care about is struggling and not take over and fix things.

But if they told you they want you just to listen and be there for them then put your flip chart and marker pen down. Save your problem-solving skills for work. It's often enough to just listen and let them know you understand.

### 9. Practical next steps

If you have asked your friend what support they would

like from you and they have indicated that some practical help would be useful then here are some suggestions.

First, what did they say they wanted? Always follow their lead even if you don't necessarily think it's the optimum solution (as long as it's legal and ethical).

Second, if they're not sure what to do next why not offer to spend some time together at theirs (or yours) researching next steps? It may be that they would like to find a book, self help group or professional counselling service. If they have a good relationship with their GP they are always a good first port of call. However the NHS IAPT (improving access to psychological therapies)



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## Stuck for ideas or where to go next?

service can be accessed online without a referral from your GP.

Maybe try Googling 'anxiety' and the name of your city to see what local services and charities there are. If that all seems a little too much how about a visit to a bookshop for a coffee and a browse? There are loads of great introductory books on anxiety and it's less formal and threatening as a first step.

### 10. End the call with a single agreed next step

Anxiety can play havoc with the formation and recall of memories. So at the end of a long, complicated phone call it's very useful to have a single 'what happens next?' that you can both remember. That can

be a non-committal as 'So we've agreed that you're not going to do anything for now but the next time you feel this way you'll call me again. Don't feel you need to do this on your own'.

However if you've agreed something more concrete it could be 'OK. So we've talked about lots there. Just to recap then. You're going to call me on Friday and arrange what time we're meeting at the bookshop on Saturday. We'll have a coffee and see what books they've got. Great.'

You'll both remember and it's easy to follow up on and remind your friend about nearer the time.



## **Thank you for being there.**

It's a good thing when one friend tries to help another. If the above seems like a lot to remember then please don't worry. If you listen, try to understand and put some time aside for them you won't go far wrong. They're lucky to have someone like you who's willing to read up and put the effort in. Thank you.

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