

Difficult Conversation Suggestions

It's never easy to have a difficult conversation—particularly when you care about someone. If you need to have a difficult conversation, here are some phrases that might help you.

General Suggestions

- "I am concerned about you; I'd like to help."
- "I'm not sure what to say, but I want you to know I care."
- "Tell me what I can do for you" or "How can I help you?"
- "How are you feeling today?"
- "How are things going for you?"
- "I've noticed _____ (behavior you have observed) and I am concerned about you."
- If you are in a public setting, "I've been concerned about you lately. May we speak privately?"
- Repeat back what your friend has shared with you. "I understand that you haven't been getting enough sleep and it's making it difficult for you to get to class on time."

Empathize

- "With so much going on, I can understand why you are feeling overwhelmed."
- Help normalize the concern. "I know you may feel alone or like you are the only student who is struggling this way, but it's normal to feel overwhelmed during finals week."
- Share your own experience with a similar concern, if you feel comfortable.

Clarify the Concerns

- If your friend is sharing concerns and they're all over the place, it can be difficult to put together what has happened, "I want to help you, but I'm not sure I understand your concern. What was the first thing that happened?" or "I understand _____ happened. What happened then?"
- "I'm sorry, but I don't understand. Could you repeat that or say it in a different way?"

Set Boundaries

- "I want to be able to help you, I will need you to _____ (insert inappropriate behavior, such as stop yelling, cursing, standing too close, etc)." or "If you want to continue this conversation, I will need you to..."
- In situations where your friend is frequently or repeatedly coming to you with concerns and you need to set some time boundaries: "I have 15 minutes right now, so within that time, what can I help you with?"

Ask Direct Questions

- "Have you had thoughts of harming or hurting yourself?"
- "Are you having thoughts of suicide?"
- Directly asking the question will not give your friend ideas about suicide.

Engage Your Friend in Solutions

- "What do you think would be most helpful for you right now?"
- "What do you need to get back on track?"
- "You asked me for help and I have offered a few suggestions, but they don't seem ok with you. What ideas do you have to address your concerns?" or "Are there solutions you can think of that you would be more comfortable with?"

Refer to An On-Campus Resource

- "I want to help you, but I am not a professional counselor. I think it might be very helpful for you to talk with them. (S)he can help you work through some of these challenges and give you some skills to help."
- Manage up. "I've met the people in that office and they are really good at helping students with these situations."
- "I think _____ (campus or off campus resource) could really help you/would be a great resource for you. Would you like to call them together?" Or, offer to walk to the office together.
- If you are comfortable, share an experience of how talking with a professional or another resource on campus helped you.

Acknowledge

- "Thank you for sharing this with me. I know it took courage to share your concerns."
- "I know it can be hard to ask for help, but I'm proud of you for reaching out to me."