

You've got a friend: Young people help each other with their mental health for 3.5 hours every week

November 30 2022, by Benjamin Hanckel, Amelia Henry; Erin Dolan and Jasbeer Musthafa Mamalipurath



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Young people experience mental health difficulties at a [higher rate](#) than any other age group.

While there's ongoing discussion about the [formal supports they need](#), young people say they're most likely to speak with [peers and friends](#)

—particularly when [mental health care](#) is difficult to access.

In partnership with youth mental [health](#) charity [batyr](#) and [clinical expertise](#), we undertook a [national survey and conducted focus groups](#) with young people (aged 16–25 years).

We wanted to understand how young people support each other and what resources they need to keep caring for their friends in safe ways.

A critical resource

Our [research](#) included a [national survey](#) with 169 young people, as well as focus group discussions with 34 young people from Melbourne and Sydney. We found young people provide on average 3.5 hours per week of support for friends, or about 182 hours each year.

Participants spoke about being there for friends whenever they needed them, and 76% agreed friends provide critical support—often more than [mental health professionals](#) and parents or guardians.

"Yeah, I think it's easier and less confrontational talking to friends rather than family or a professional," said Mackenzie (names have been changed).

This support includes assisting during [tough times](#) (such as during a relationship or family breakdown) and support due to health or [financial difficulties](#), exam stress, as well as mental health distress. Almost 95% of young people in our study said they had helped a friend through mental ill-health.

Emotional support means "being there" for a friend, but it includes other assistance too, such as [financial help](#), temporary housing, or connecting friends with professional services.

Young people discussed being able to provide immediate support to each other. This support is ongoing and involves more than just one encounter.

Personalized, dynamic support

All the young people we spoke to said their support changes depending on the friend, time, place and situation. Malis told us:

"I think it just depends on the person and sort of like their approach to certain things [...] it also just depends on the context."

They emphasized there is not a "one size fits all" approach. As Ari said:

"Giving support, it's not a formulaic thing."

Tailoring an approach to their friends' needs

While there is no single approach, there are some common components to how young people support their friends.

A common first step is noticing something is wrong. This might be a mood change observed in person or online.

"You know when they're just not talking as much or they're not really, you know, interacting with anyone [then] you kind of say "Okay, something's wrong here,"" said Lara

They spoke about carefully and strategically starting conversations to make it easier for their friends to talk. Young people say this requires more than asking "Are you OK?". Ash told us it was about "being a lot more specific and directing questions with a bit more intent."

Sometimes friends approach them, and they spoke about being ready for them when and where they were needed; being on "standby," as Malis put it.

Support takes place in-person and online, and sometimes moves between the two settings. Omar said a friend might start chatting on a train "and then they go online and start talking."

Providing the right support 5 ways

Young people say providing the right support and response means working out what their friend needs, whether they want advice (or not), and taking into account their cultural background.

They spoke about taking the following actions:

- sharing their [own lived experiences](#) and what worked for them
- finding [online resources](#) about the issue a friend was going through and forwarding details to them
- finding lists of accessible professionals and supports
- taking a friend along to a mental health professional, or organizing their visit with a mental health professional
- talking to someone in their immediate family or network to get their friend the support they needed, though this was often considered a last resort.

The young people we spoke to said they avoided unnecessary engagements with adults. They felt they'd been entrusted with their friend's concerns and needs. Adults were frequently seen as not

understanding issues around mental health more generally.

However, if they thought a problem was beyond their control or expertise, then they would seek outside help. As Shalani said: "If I feel like it's out of my area of expertise or something, I would probably think it's better for them to like go elsewhere."

Helping themselves too

Young people can sometimes [take on too much responsibility](#) for their friends. Young people in the study spoke about how they look after themselves to create healthy boundaries. Celine had learnt this the hard way and said: "Ultimately you can help your friend, but then you've got to make sure that you're okay first to do that."

However, sometimes the lines between being a good friend and supporter and maintaining self-care were difficult. As Sam said: "I have found it difficult when I was having a hard day and had to be their support person for the whole day. It's also difficult when you are out of the house (with family or other friends) and can tell they need you at that moment but you don't really have the time, but you make time anyway."

Some young people didn't provide help to a [friend](#) because they were worried about saying the wrong thing or putting the friendship at risk by expressing concern.

Helping them help each other

This study shows the critical work young people are doing to informally support each other.

We need to recognize the expertise of these young people, particularly when there are difficulties accessing formal mental health support.

We need to think about how we best resource young people in acceptable ways, so they have the tools to continue to [support](#) friends and manage feelings of responsibility.

We need to develop services and responses that include [friends](#), and we need to create and foster public and online spaces where young people feel comfortable supporting each other, including on social media.

And ultimately, we need to address many of the underlying fundamental issues that result in tough times for [young people](#)—poverty, uncertainty, exclusion and discrimination—the social drivers that lead to and exacerbate tough times.

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