

Your friend is in a really hard place. It could be heartbreak, a cancer diagnosis, a betrayal, a child is sick, a parent is dying, a legal mess, or they made a painful mistake. Whatever the reason, it is causing deep suffering.

What do you do?

When I received a terminal diagnosis, my family and friends pulled me through the unimaginable. Every person's journey is different, but what all crises have in common is that they are made lighter, together.

Try these 10 steps to be a good friend in tough times.

1. Put Your Own O2 Mask First

Stop. Breathe. Find calm. The point is to show up fully for your friend. You can only do this if you take care of yourself first and often. Notice what feelings of loss, grief, anger, and regret this brings up for you. Get alone, get quiet, and process your emotions.

2. Show up kindly, gently, and shut up.

But please show up. Don't avoid your friend because you don't

know what to do. If your friend is hiding or isolating, try sending this text message: "I'm coming over. I won't stay long. If you really don't want me there, say so, but otherwise, I'm coming." Then shut up. Don't ask what they need. It's too stressful. They might not know. Just say, "I'm here to listen if you want to talk."

3. Recognize that it can't be fixed or distracted away.

Resist the urge to give advice or share stories of triumph or tragedy, "Oh! When I got a terrible haircut, this is what I did to feel better..." or "When Aunt Sally went through this, she tried the no-solid-food diet and she is climbing Everest now..." Just picture yourself in your friend's shoes: when has this kind of advice ever helped? Also, our tendency is to want to minimize what is happening and distract our friend with funny videos or magazines "to help them get through it." But the friends that helped me the most were the ones who were willing to stare into the abyss with me and not blink or shy away, but accept what was happening, and talk about it. Say, "This must be so hard. I'm ready to go to dark places with you when you are."

4. Ring Wisdom

This comes from [Susan Silk & Barry Goldman in the L.A Times](#). Draw a small circle. Put the name of the person who is in crisis in the center of the circle. Then draw a slightly larger circle around the small one. Put the names of significant others inside this ring. Then keep drawing concentric circles with friends' names, etc. The wisdom is this: *All the fear and worry can go out to larger rings, but only strength and goodness can come in.* Comfort IN. Dump OUT.

5. Manage Communications

Encourage your friend to dictate to you a version of the details of the diagnosis, or legal case, or trauma that they are comfortable sharing with friends and neighbors. Then come up with a plan for relaying this information and future updates. Volunteer to make an email chain, a *What's App* thread, a

super-simple website, or start a *Caring Bridge* page to manage the volume of questions and love pouring in. With my diagnosis, I was so overwhelmed, we created a website where people could get updates. I also put a “no questions” rule in place. While it was fine to ask me how I was feeling in that moment, other questions about the disease or what was going to happen next kept throwing me back into the discomfort of the diagnosis or prognosis. I said, “Please only send texts with kind thoughts or pictures, no questions.”

6. Identify a team leader.

This will help to harness well-meaning questions and the “Is there anything I can do?” energy into real results. The goal is to have one person who meets with your friend and creates a list of tasks that others can help get done and coordinates the action plan. Help your friend identify someone who is organized and comfortable with behind-the-scenes work. When I was sick, my team leader was instrumental in setting up a meal train, reading my emails and organizing them for me, managing a fundraising campaign, posting updates, arranging driving and childcare. Tip: Look beyond close family and friends for this role. Often a colleague, or a diligent neighbor, is poised to do this with grace and efficacy.

7. Make a “Fire Escape Plan”

Create a master list of comforts that your friend recognizes as giving them peace and calm. This comes from [Taylor Moffitt](#), a psychotherapist in Boulder. Make a few categories on a small piece of paper: People, Places, Practices, Music/Art, Books/Movies. Then write down names of people who are non-judgmental, nourishing places worth visiting or visualizing, practices that restore (yoga, walking, axe-throwing), music and art that feeds, and books or movies that lift. Display this card prominently in their house, like where you would place directions to the nearest fire escape. You could do this too, in

your house, to find balance and wellness.

8. Feel the feelings, and drop the story.

Let your friend know that you aren't afraid of anything: deep sorrow, irrational joy, angry tirades, or shaking fear. Give them permission to express themselves fully around you. But when your friend starts spinning on fears and turning them into fact, use Pema Chödrön's advice to remind them to: *Feel the feelings, and drop the story*. She also says to be the "mountain in the hurricane" during turbulent times. Stay steady, and say, "Nobody knows how this is going to turn out. Not you, not anyone. You can face the dark sides of this reality and still choose to focus on a positive outcome. There is no harm in picturing a future that has you thriving and laughing." Or take them to a lighter place with a gratitude practice. Say, "The world is crazy, but can't we just stop for a second and take in how good it can be, too?"

9. Keep gifts simple.

Write a handwritten letter or a card. In it, remind your friend of how they got through tough times before. Offer things that show your friend, *No one has to do this alone*. Mow their lawn. Pool resources to do a meal train. Avoid sending only cupcakes and cookies. Think fresh fruit and nourishing foods. Drop off gift cards for take-out food, grocery stores, cleaning services, massage therapists. Invent a therapist gift card. I also really appreciated when one friend gave me gift cards to Target, not for me, but to use as thank yous to my nurses. As a mom, the gifts that moved me the most were those that cared for my family. One friend helped me to create eight care packages that the kids would receive, one for each week I was in the hospital. More than gifts, **just check in often**. Remember, no questions. A single emoji or picture of something soothing or funny is enough to say, I'm here. I've got you.

10. Come up with a mantra

Offer your friend a simple phrase as a touchstone to find peace. Or make one up together. Some ideas: *All will be well. Brave over perfect. Temporary pain, long-term gain. The best is yet to come.* Say it often, especially before each step forwards. It works as a pause button, a reset button, and a ladder, all at once.

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