

A guide to

SUPPORTING OTHERS WITH MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES



Developed as part of
ICMR's Multistate Implementation Research Study on Improving
Mental Well Being Among School and College Students

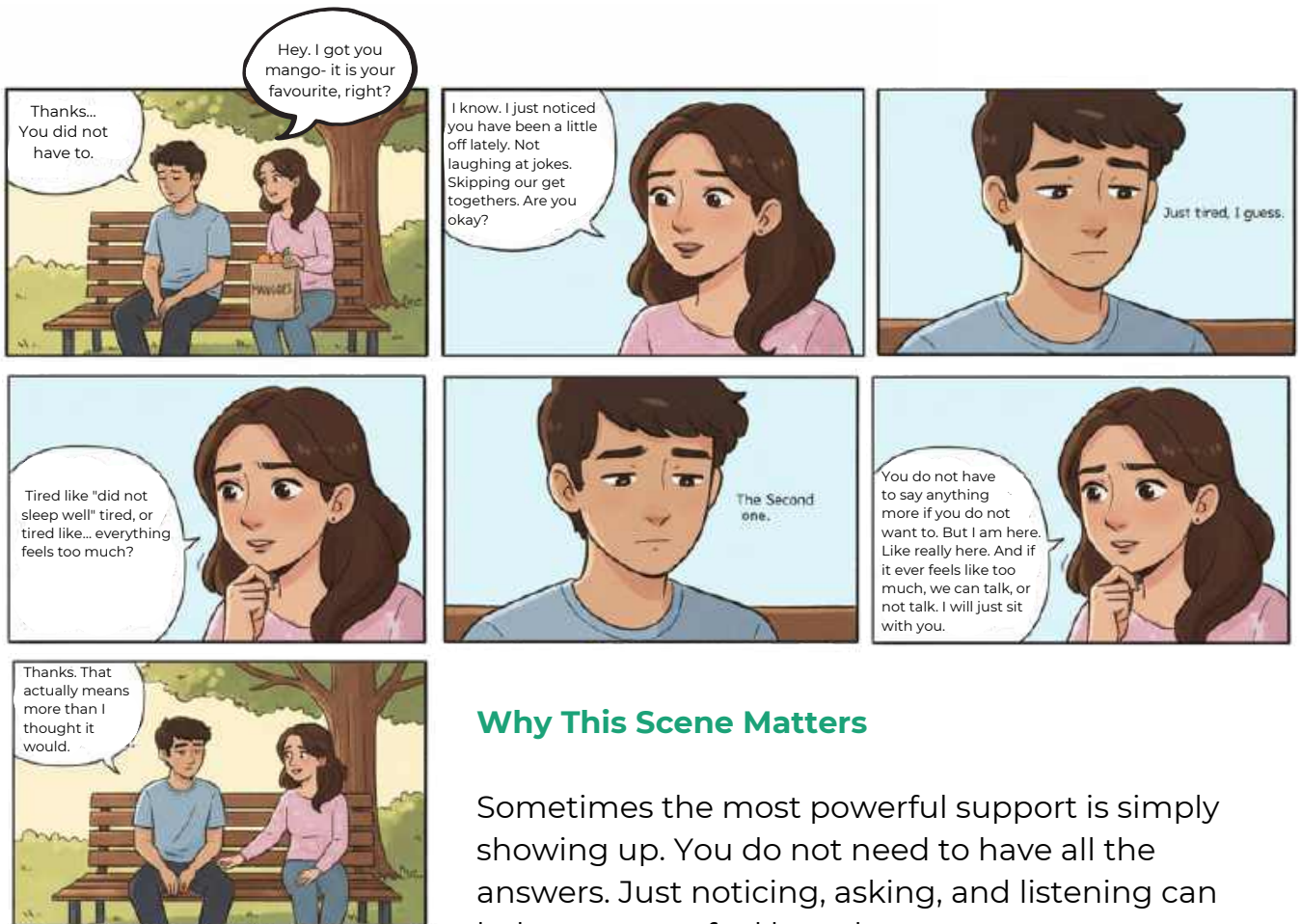




about

SUPPORTING OTHERS WITH MENTAL HEALTH CHALLENGES

Imagine a quiet bench under a tree, it is break time, but Aarav is sitting alone, staring at the ground. His usually animated face looks tired. Zoya, his friend, walks over slowly with two juice boxes.



Why This Scene Matters

Sometimes the most powerful support is simply showing up. You do not need to have all the answers. Just noticing, asking, and listening can help someone feel less alone.

“If I Were Zoya...”: Imagine you are in Zoya’s place. How would you feel? What would you say differently, or the same?

Now switch- imagine you are Aarav. What would it take for you to open up?

Write or sketch your thoughts in a journal.

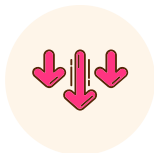


Why is it Important to Support Mental Health?



Mental health is just as important as physical health. It affects how we think, feel, act, and relate to others. When someone is struggling with their mental health, having a friend or peer who notices, listens, and supports them can make a huge difference.

Supporting others with their mental and emotional health has multiple benefits:



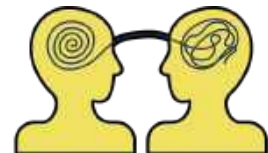
Reduces feelings of loneliness



Encourages help-seeking



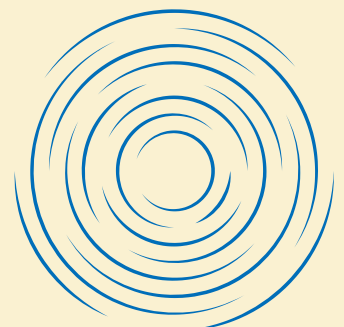
Builds stronger friendships and communities



Shows that no one has to face struggles alone, building a sense of belongingness

The Ripple Effect

Draw a ripple in water. In the center, write "I listened to a friend." In the ripples, write what positive things could happen because of that one act of support (e.g., "They felt heard", "They asked for help", "They started feeling hopeful"). Reflect on how one kind act can spread.



Recognising Signs That Someone is Struggling

Mental health challenges show up in various ways; some may be obvious, while some may not be. Being observant and kind helps you spot small shifts that signal someone may need support.

① They Seem Withdrawn or Quiet

- They start to avoid group activities or conversations they usually enjoy.
- They may spend more time alone during breaks or lunch.
- They give short replies like “I am fine” or “Nothing” and seem distant.

Clue: You often notice them asking for space and see them isolating.



② They Talk Negatively About Themselves:

- They put themselves down often: “I am useless,” “I always mess things up.”
- They might joke about being “a failure” or “a burden”- but it does not sound like a joke.

Clue: Their words show low self-worth, even when others compliment them.



source: Roger Alley

③ Sudden Changes in Mood

- They may be unusually irritable, angry, or tearful.
- They swing quickly from laughing to going quiet or upset.

Clue: You are seeing them snap over small things or tear up unexpectedly.



④ Changes in Sleep or Eating Patterns

- They often talk about being tired or look visibly exhausted.
- They eat significantly more or less than usual.
- They may mention staying up all night or sleeping all day.



Clue: They start skipping breakfast or say, “I barely slept last night- again.”

⑤ Loss of Interest in Activities They Used to Enjoy

- They stop showing up for outings, sports, or hobbies they once loved.
- They no longer get excited about things that used to make them happy.



Clue: The friend who always drew in their sketchbook no longer brings it to school.

⑥ Drop in Academic Performance

- They start missing homework or falling behind in class.
- Their grades drop without clear explanation.



Clue: A usually attentive student stops taking notes or misses deadlines.

⑦ Physical Complaints Without a Clear Cause

- Frequent headaches, stomachaches, or body pain.
- They visit the doctor often, but there is no obvious illness.



Clue: “I just feel sick all the time, but the doctor says there is nothing wrong.”

⑧ Expressions of Hopelessness or Feeling Overwhelmed

- They say things like:
 - “I am just tired of everything.”
 - “Nothing matters anymore.”
 - “What is the point?”
- These may be signs of deeper emotional pain.



Clue: They speak about life as if it is permanently difficult or pointless.

9 Increased Risk-Taking or Reckless Behavior

- They start acting out- breaking rules, taking dangerous dares, or doing things out of character.
- They may seem numb to consequences.

Clue: “I do not care what happens anymore” becomes a common phrase.

10 Talking About Death or Disappearing



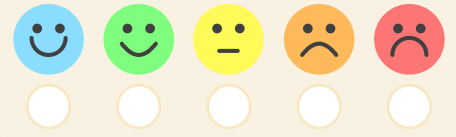
- They make statements like:
 - “I wish I could just disappear.”
 - “People would be better off without me.”
- Even if said jokingly, these are serious and should never be ignored.

Clue: They say goodbye in unusual ways or give away personal belongings.

Note: One sign alone might not mean someone is struggling- but when you notice multiple changes or behaviors that feel different from what is usual, it is okay (and important) to check in or tell a trusted adult.

Mood Tracker Map

Create a weekly “mood tracker” for a fictional character or yourself using colors and/or emojis to reflect on daily feelings. Think about how changes in this map might help someone understand a shift in mental health.



How to Offer Support

Just being there for someone who seems to be in distress can be enough. You do not always need to be a professional to support someone.

Support means:

- Showing you care
- Being non-judgmental
- Giving them space to share
- Encouraging, not pushing



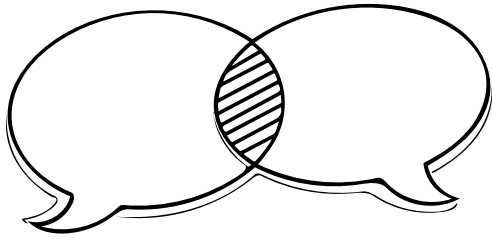
Reflection Prompt: What Helped Me?

Think of a time when you were sad or anxious. What did someone say or do that helped? What did not help? Use the space given below to note down your reflections:

You can use these reflections to guide how you support others.

Let us look at some basic tools to offer support:

1 Starting a Conversation



It can feel scary to bring up a topic that is causing someone distress, but reaching out to someone can show that you care.

Tips to start:

- Choose a private, safe moment
- Speak gently: “I have noticed you have been seeming a bit down lately. Want to talk?”
- Be patient - Some people may need time to open up, trust and begin sharing

You could say:

- “I am here for you. You are not alone.”
- “You do not have to talk now, but when you are ready, I will listen.”

2 Listening with Empathy

Listening with empathy means being fully present with someone, without judgment, and showing them they are seen and heard. It is one of the most powerful ways to support a friend.

What to Do:

1. Be Fully Present

- Put away your phone, turn toward the person, and give them your full attention.
- Show through your body language that you are listening, like turning your shoulders and body towards them.



2. Make Eye Contact (Gently)

Look at them occasionally- but do not stare. Nods and eye contact can help people feel heard.

3. Use Simple Encouragements

Say things like:

"I hear you."

"That sounds really tough."

"I am here with you."

"Tell me more if you want to."

4. Let Them Speak Freely

Avoid interrupting or rushing them. Let silences exist- sometimes people may need time to find the right words to talk about an experience.

5. Reflect and Paraphrase

Repeat or summarize what someone has said to show that you understand: "So you have been feeling really overwhelmed lately, right?"



6. Validate Their Feelings

Show that their emotions are valid:

- "It is okay to feel that way."
- "Anyone in your place would be upset because of this."

7. Stay Non-Judgmental

Even if their situation or feelings are unfamiliar to you, avoid judging or offering opinions.



8. Ask Open-Ended Questions (Only if They are Willing)

Use gentle questions to help them open up:

“How long have you been feeling this way?”

“What has been on your mind lately?”

9. Respect Emotions - Even the Uncomfortable Ones

Try not to “cheer someone up” immediately. Let them feel what they are feeling, validate and acknowledge their feelings before you begin to cheer them up.

10. Offer Support, Not Solutions (Unless Asked)

Do not jump to advice. Instead say:

“Would you like help thinking through what to do next?”

“Would it help to talk to someone like a counselor?”

What to Avoid:

- Avoid interrupting or talk over them
- Do not say things like “Just relax” or “It is not a big deal”
- Avoid comparing their experience to yours (“When I was sad, I just...”)
- Avoid trying to fix everything or promising to do so
- Do not share their story with others without permission



Bonus Tip: Sometimes just sitting beside someone in silence is also powerful way to support someone and help them feel less alone.

3 Encouraging Professional Help

Some problems need more than just a friend’s help. Encouraging someone to talk to a trusted adult, campus counselor, or mental health professional is important.

You can say:

- “Talking to someone trained can really help.”
- “I can go with you to talk to the counselor, if you want.”

Helplines

Here are some helpline numbers that offer psychological support:

- TeleMANAS – 14416 (free, 24x7, multiple languages)
- iCall – 9152987821 (free, confidential support)
- Vandrevalla Foundation – 1860 266 2345 or 9999 666 555
- AASRA – 91-22-27546669 / 27546667



4 Respecting Boundaries

Even with good intentions, it is important to respect others' space and choices. Try to inculcate the following into your conversations:

- Do not force someone to share
- Do not try to “fix” everything or provide solutions that you feel might be right. Trust that the person is the ultimate expert of their own life.
- Respect when someone says, “I am not ready to talk”. Sometimes giving people time helps them feel more prepared to talk about difficult experiences.

Boundary Map

Draw two overlapping circles (like a Venn diagram). One is your role as a friend, and the other is their right to privacy. What belongs in the middle (e.g., offering support, checking in)? What stays in their circle (e.g., when or if they want to talk)?



5 Regular Check-Ins

Support can continue in different ways after the first talk. Consistent care and supportive actions can be of immense help for someone who is going through a difficult phase in their life. You can:

- Check in with a message: “Just thinking of you. Hope you are okay.”
- Celebrate little victories
- Be patient during tough days

Kindness Jar

Create a virtual or real “kindness jar” where you drop in small notes to your friend. These could be uplifting quotes, jokes, or memories. You can even share one note a day.



6 Taking Care of Yourself While Supporting Others

Supporting a friend through tough times is brave and kind. But remember—you matter too. You deserve rest, joy, and support, just like the person you are helping.

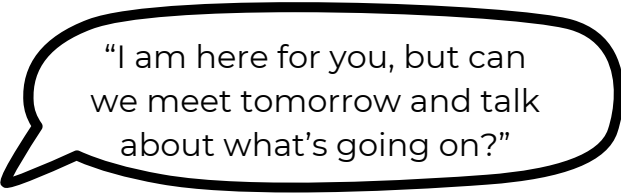
Caring for someone else does not mean forgetting yourself. In fact, to really be there for others, you need to look after your own emotional well-being first. Think of it like flying on a plane: they always say, “Put on your own oxygen mask before helping someone else.”

Why? Because you can not pour from an empty cup.

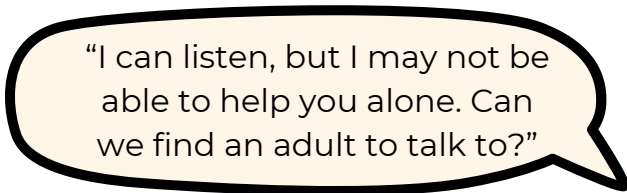
Ways to care for yourself while being there for others:

1. Set Healthy Boundaries

It is okay to say:



“I am here for you, but can we meet tomorrow and talk about what’s going on?”



“I can listen, but I may not be able to help you alone. Can we find an adult to talk to?”

- Remember, boundaries are not selfish; they are how you protect your energy, emotions, and time.

2. Talk to a Trusted Adult If You Feel Overwhelmed

- Supporting someone can sometimes feel heavy or confusing.
- While you continue supporting others, you can always talk to:
 - A school counselor
 - A teacher you trust
 - A parent or older sibling or trusted adult
 - A helpline (anonymously if needed)

Asking for help does not imply you are giving up on your friend: it means you are choosing the right support system.

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3. Make Space for Your Own Feelings

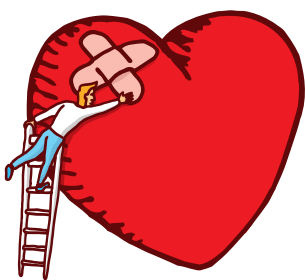
- You are allowed to feel tired, frustrated, confused, or even sad when helping someone else.
- Do not bottle it up- write in a journal, talk to someone, or express it through art or music.



4. Do Things That Recharge You

- Keep time for your own joys, even during difficult times.
- Go for a walk, read a book, dance to your playlist, doodle, or just take a nap.

5. You cannot Take Responsibility for Their Healing



- You can support people, but taking complete responsibility for helping someone can be both unrealistic and daunting.
- Healing takes time, and it often requires professional help. A way to support others can also include reducing stigma and encouraging them to seek support from a professional.

6. Know Your Limits, And Honour Them

- If you ever feel emotionally drained, anxious, or stuck because of someone else's pain, pause and check in with yourself.
- It is okay to say, "I need help supporting my friend" or "I am not okay right now."

Self-Check: "Am I Taking Care of Me?"



Once a week, ask yourself:

- Have I done something just for myself today?
- Am I sleeping and eating well?
- Am I feeling overwhelmed, angry, or sad all the time?
- Do I need to talk to someone about how I feel?

If you answer "yes" to the last question, reach out—you deserve care too.

Supporting someone does not mean carrying them to the final destination. It means walking beside them, guiding them and helping them pave their own destination and path. While walking with someone, it is essential to take care of your own steps too.

Imagine a lighthouse: it does not steer the ship, it does not calm the sea. It simply shines so others can find their way. That is what being a supportive friend means.





Developed by
School of Human Ecology (SHE)
Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai