



You've Got A Friend

A guide to supporting lesbian and
bisexual women to improve their
mental health and wellbeing

LGBT
foundation



WOMEN

Introduction

'A friend in need is a friend indeed' - so goes the old saying. When we asked lesbian and bisexual women where they'd go for support, most said they'd approach a friend first. It's great that so many of us feel we have friends we can rely on, but sometimes it can be a little overwhelming to be the first port of call, especially if someone is in crisis. Other times we may suspect a friend or loved one is struggling but we're not sure what to do.

Research shows that lesbian and bisexual women may be more likely to suffer poor mental health than other women. This handy guide aims to help you identify when someone may need a little extra support, tell you what to do when you know a friend is struggling and offer some practical ways to boost wellbeing for everyone. It will also give you some links for professional support and some tips on looking after yourself if caring for someone gets a bit much.

This booklet is aimed at people who are friends, partners or family members of lesbian or bisexual women who are suffering from depression, anxiety or other mental health issues or who are just going through a rough time. However, if you are going through a tough time yourself, perhaps this booklet will give you the confidence you need to reach out for some extra support.

Remember, whether you're a concerned friend, partner or family member or someone who's having a hard time themselves, LGBT Foundation is here if you need us.

Our helpline is **0345 3 30 30 30** or you can email **helpline@lgbt.foundation**

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I Saw **The Sign**

Signs That Someone Needs Support

People who are having a hard time can often be the last to recognise this or acknowledge that they are not behaving as they usually do.

As a trusted person, it can be helpful to spot changes in a person's behaviour, feelings, thoughts and physical actions which can help you identify if they are struggling.

Changes in behaviour include:

- Avoiding social situations
- Not enjoying activities that they usually actively participate in

Changes in feelings include:

- Feeling anxious
- Feeling irritable

Changes in thoughts include:

- *'I'm a failure'*
- *'People would be better off without me'*

Changes in physical actions include:

- Fatigue
- Significant changes in appetite

These lists are not exhaustive but if you detect one or more of these signs it's a good idea to start a conversation with your friend to see how they're doing.

'When You Say Nothing at All'

Starting a Conversation

Sometimes we sense that someone isn't feeling great, but it's hard to know how to broach the subject. The reflex answer to "how are you?" is usually "fine, thanks", which rarely tells the full story. Here are some tips for starting a conversation if you suspect someone's struggling:

- If they say they're fine, try gently querying this answer: "Are you sure? You haven't seemed your usual self recently." Try to be supportive rather than accusatory.
- Being a good listener requires a lot of patience. Bear in mind that most people don't expect us to 'fix' their problems. Concentrate on allowing your friend to feel heard and acknowledged. Sometimes this is all they need in that moment.
- If someone asks for advice on what to do next, ask them questions to help them explore what is right for them. If you're unsure, it's OK to say so!
- If possible, try to manage your own reactions if someone is upset. It can be an added worry for a person in distress if they feel guilty for upsetting other people by showing their vulnerability.
- While people can benefit from knowing that they're not alone in experiencing certain feelings, resist the temptation to say "That's happened to me, I know exactly how you feel!" Everyone's situation is different, and people respond differently depending on their personalities and life experiences. Let your friend explain what it's like for them.

'I'll Be There For You'

Five Ways To Support Someone

When you know a friend is having a hard time it can be difficult to know what to do to make things better. The Five Ways to Wellbeing are a set of suggestions to improve your life. Integrating these into everyday life may improve wellbeing, whether someone is currently struggling or not.

The Five Ways are:

Connect **Be Active**
Take Notice
Give **Keep Learning**

Over the next few pages we'll make some suggestions for things you can do around each of the five ways to wellbeing. But don't feel you have to stick to what's suggested - find out what works for you.

If you'd like to know more about the Five Ways to Wellbeing and the research behind them go to www.fivewaystowellbeing.org



'You've Got A Friend In Me'

Connect

When we feel low or anxious, it can be tempting to hide ourselves away. Sometimes we do need time alone to reflect, or take a break from the world. But it can be easy to isolate ourselves.

Social contact can be at different levels depending on what we feel able to cope with. If someone isn't up to a big get-together, offer to meet them on their own. If they're struggling to connect face to face, texts, social media messaging or a phone call can mean a lot. It lets people know they've not been forgotten, that you're thinking of them and when they feel able to socialise, they've got someone who still cares about them.

Other people may focus on 'putting on a brave face'. They may continue socialising and being the listening ear for their friends, but struggle to reveal that they're now the ones who need some support.

Making new friends or trying new activities can feel daunting. Sometimes we focus on the best and worst expectations - we hope it will be perfect but fear it will be awful. The reality is usually somewhere in between. It can take time and perseverance to feel involved in a new environment, and this can make us feel very self-conscious.

Remind your friend that most people are thinking about how they're coming across themselves, rather than judging other people. Sometimes a focus on a structured activity like photography, cinema trips, a craft or a sport can take the pressure off and make socialising feel more natural.

'Move Your Body'

Be Active

If someone's feeling depressed, anxious or stressed, physical activity can seem like the last thing they want to do. It may feel like it's too much effort to get out of bed, let alone get out of the house! But getting active produces endorphins and has been proven to help people with depression. Physical activity doesn't have to be an hour-long gym session. Even a 15-minute walk can help you clear your mind and relax. Any exercise is better than none.

There are lots of different ways you can get active, and encourage your friends to join you. Here are some of our top tips for getting active:

Do whatever you can manage:

If mobility is a problem try chair-based exercises. Don't be afraid to start small and work your way up.

Go for a dog walk:

If you don't have your own dog, borrow one (check out www.borrowmydoggy.com). Of course, if you don't like dogs you can always just go for a walk!

Join a sports club:

Joining a club and exercising with others is a great way to get motivated. It can be intimidating the first time on your own, so support a friend by suggesting you go along together. If you're looking for an LGBT sports club check out:

www.pridesports.org.uk

Get planting:

Gardening is great both to get you outdoors and to get you moving without noticing it - all that weeding, hoeing and mowing is an excellent work-out. If you don't have a garden yourself you could volunteer at a local community garden. Check out www.farmgarden.org.uk for one near you.

Get in the water:

Many people report that swimming helps clear the mind and it's excellent exercise as it engages all your main muscle groups. Swimming is also good if you have reduced mobility or an injury, as the water supports you as you move. If you need some extra motivation, check out a local swimming club, like Manchester's LGBT club Northern Wave:

www.northernwave.org

Challenge yourself:

Whether it's running, cycling, hiking or something more extreme, signing up for an event that will challenge you is a great motivation. You and your friend could sign up together and then work out a joint training plan. If you fancy raising cash for a good cause as well, check out www.lgbt.foundation/getinvolved for some charity challenge ideas.



'Suddenly I See'

Take Notice

Too often we can rush through life without taking notice of all of the smaller things that can have a positive impact on our wellbeing. If a person is feeling low this can be particularly difficult, but these little rays of sunlight still exist and focusing on them can benefit long-term wellbeing.

Everyone needs a good moan sometimes. But solely talking about things you're not happy with can reinforce negative feelings. If your friend always talks about negative things, gently encourage them to remember what's good in their life as well. Think about the little things that give you a lift and share those moments alongside the bad.

Changes in scenery can improve mood – whether it's rolling hills, a tree in full bloom or an interesting building, encourage your friend to seek out new scenery that interests them. Something as simple as a different route home can provide something new to look at (and potentially some nice photos to share!).

Techniques like Mindfulness Meditation and Emotional Freedom Technique (EFT) can also be really effective in enabling us to focus on the present and reduce stress and anxiety. The basic skills for both of these techniques are simple and relatively easy to learn, check out www.start2.co.uk for top tips.

Take notice of the little things that bring a smile to your friend's face - perhaps they laugh at a certain type of humour or love a cute cat picture? Sharing a joke, a photo or even just a quick cuppa with someone who you know is feeling down can lift both your mood and theirs.

'You Learn'

Keep Learning

When you're feeling down it can feel like your mind is constantly filled with dark thoughts.

People sometimes talk about feeling unable to shut out the negativity. This can make it really hard to find the energy to focus on anything else. But learning new things not only broadens your horizons, it gives your brain something different to think about and can also boost self-confidence.

There are lots of ways to keep learning - it doesn't have to involve getting a qualification. Taking up a new hobby, reading a book or having a discussion about something you're interested in are all ways to keep your brain active and engaged.

Encouraging a friend who's feeling down to keep learning may feel a bit difficult but it can be as simple as suggesting that the two of you try something new together. For example, LGBT Foundation runs free monthly skills-based workshops for lesbian and bisexual women (www.lgbt.foundation/women) and there are plenty of other organisations who also run free or cheap discussions, workshops or classes.

'Give Me Just A Little More Time'

Give

It turns out there really is some truth in the cliché that it's better to give than to receive! Giving, whether it's time, resources or compassion, is not only good for others, it's also been shown to boost self-esteem and can give a sense of purpose.

Giving can come in any form and doesn't always have to be a grand gesture, or a strain on your bank balance. The smallest actions count and those little acts of kindness can brighten up someone's day!

Whether that's a smile, a thank you, or saying a kind word to a friend or a stranger - being generous with your time can have a real impact on their health and happiness as well as on your own.

Maybe suggest a catch-up over a cup of coffee, or organise a day out as a surprise treat. This doesn't have to cost you anything either, you could go for a walk in the park or invite them round to your home.

Helping and working with others can also give you a sense of purpose and increase feelings of self-worth. It's perfectly natural to question your own value while measuring yourself against others. Remember that giving your time in a constructive way can help to strengthen existing relationships, develop new ones and build up your confidence.

Of course, if you feel prepared to take on larger commitments then you could volunteer your time with a local charity (like LGBT Foundation!) or join a community group.

Helping and offering support to others, while working towards a shared goal, can be a really positive experience. You and your friend could check out local volunteering opportunities together at www.do-it.org

The S Words

It is not uncommon for a person who is having a hard time to contemplate suicide and/or to be coping through self-harm. It is also common for people to struggle to talk about this, or allude to their thoughts in a roundabout way.

Suicide

If someone confides that they are thinking of suicide, or you suspect that they may be considering killing themselves, it's natural to feel scared or unsure of what to do. But you can give them the information to make an informed choice about accessing support.

If someone says something that makes you suspect they are feeling suicidal (for example, talking about 'ending it all', 'feeling unable to go on' or 'doing something stupid') ask them directly if they are talking about suicide and whether they are considering killing themselves.

If they say yes, ask how severe and frequent these thoughts are. Contrary to popular belief, talking about suicide does not make it more likely that someone will kill themselves. In fact, it's been shown to reduce the risk.

Encourage them to share with you if they have made any plans and if anybody else knows about these.

Remind them they are not alone and that you can support them to access the right services: all is not lost. Encourage them to talk to their GP, or call a helpline like the Samaritans (08457 90 90 90) where they can talk to someone and get links to further support.

Self-harm doesn't always mean the person is attempting suicide. It can be a coping mechanism that they are using when feeling in distress.

Self-harm

There is a lot of shame attached to self-harm so your friend may find it extremely difficult to talk about it. It may be easier to prompt a conversation by telling them you have noticed a change in their behaviour (you can also mention if you have noticed injuries or risky behaviour). Remind them you are not judging their actions and that you wish to support them.

Encourage them to seek help from a professional, reassure them this will be done in a safe space, and check the Useful Links section of this resource.

Whether through suicide or self-harm, if you think someone is in imminent danger, encourage them to go to the nearest A&E department. If necessary, call 999 and explain that you are worried for your friend's safety.

'Under Pressure'

What to do if it all gets too much

Over the previous sections we have talked about the Five Ways to Wellbeing and how those can help you to better support people you care about.

Despite all our efforts to support others, sometimes things just don't seem to get any better for them. You may be running out of options, or quite simply, you may no longer feel able to support the person you are concerned about. It's OK to feel this way! To be able to care for others self-care must come first.

If you are feeling emotionally overloaded here are some suggestions:

- 1** Genuinely trying to help another person is great but you can't make change happen. Ultimately every individual has to help themselves.
- 2** Communicate honestly with the other person about how the relationship is affecting you. Re-assess how you can support them and make an agreement that you feel comfortable with.
- 3** Validate your own struggles as much as you validate other people's struggles. If you are feeling overloaded don't ignore those feelings.
- 4** Accept that it is not your responsibility to make the person feel better.
- 5** Suggest a chat with their GP, a therapist or perhaps accessing a peer support group; this may be a good starting point for them to access specialist support.

If you feel you need to talk to someone for advice or for your own support perhaps a chat with a specialist service could help. Contact one of the services provided in the 'Useful Links' section of this resource.

Ultimately, if you feel you can't offer the support a friend, family member or partner needs, it's OK to say so! Over the page there are links to organisations who may be more able to help.



Useful Links

LGBT Foundation

LGBT Foundation offers a range of support including:

- A helpline
- Informal pop-in service every week-day from 10am
- Professional counselling
- Befriending
- Social/support groups

Address: **5 Richmond Street, Manchester M1 3HF**

Helpline: **0345 3 30 30 30 (calls charged at local rate)**

Email: **helpline@lgbt.foundation**

Web: **www.lgbt.foundation**

Carers UK

Whether you care for a loved one for a few hours or full-time, Carers UK can offer advice and support.

Adviceline: **0808 808 7777**

Web: **www.carersuk.org**

FFLAG

Support for families and friends of LGB people.

Helpline: **0845 652 0311**

Web: **www.fflag.org.uk**

Mind

UK's largest mental health charity providing information and coordinating independent local community support groups.

Infoline: **0300 123 3393**

Web: **www.mind.org.uk**

Moodswings

Manchester based charity which aims to help people recover from mood problems and the severe emotional distress they can cause.

Helpline: **0161 832 37 36**

Web: **www.moodswings.org.uk**

National Self-Harm Network

Provides an online forum to support those affected by self-harm.

Web: www.nshn.co.uk

Samaritans

National organisation supporting anyone in distress at any time. Helpline is open 24 hours a day, 365 days of the year.

Helpline: **08457 90 90 90**

Web: www.samaritans.org

The Sanctuary

Manchester based mental health service offering overnight support for those in crisis either face to face or over the phone.

Tel: **0161 637 0808**

Web: www.selfhelpservices.org.uk/sanctuary

Self Help Services

User-led mental health charity providing mental health services and self-help initiatives to people across the North West.

Tel: **0161 226 3871**

Web: www.selfhelpservices.org.uk

Silverline

Offers a helpline and befriending service to reduce the isolation of older people.

Helpline: **0800 4 70 80 90**

Web: www.thesilverline.org.uk

42nd Street

Manchester-based charity providing support to young people aged 13-25.

Helpline: **0161 228 1888**

Web: www.42ndstreet.org.uk

We believe in a
fair and equal
society where all
lesbian, gay,
bisexual and trans
people can achieve
their full potential.

This guide is available in large print
by calling **0345 3 30 30 30**
or email **info@lgbt.foundation**

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