



Australian Government



Years 8 and above

Supporting my friend post-harm

Watching a friend go through something harmful can be hard. You may want to help, but you might not always know how.

It is completely normal to feel helpless or worried about saying the wrong thing. However, peer support is one of the most powerful protective factors available to young people. Doing it well does not require you to be a professional. It requires knowing both what to do and what not to do.

This resource is a practical guide on how to support your friend while looking after yourself.

Show up without taking over

When someone you care about is hurting, your instinct can be to go into 'fix-it' mode. True support means being present without trying to manage the situation or minimise what happened.

- ⦿ **Just be there for them:** You do not need to have the perfect solution or 'fix' anything. Sitting with your friend and letting them feel whatever they are feeling is enough.
- ⦿ **Embrace the silence:** You do not need to fill every quiet moment with empty reassurances like, 'Everything will be fine'. Sometimes, just staying quiet and keeping them company means more than anything you could say.

'I just wanted validation and comfort, rather than a rebuttal against my opinion. I wanted to spill tea, to yell my anger out to someone.'

– YOUNG PERSON, 16,
PROJECT ROCKIT NATIONAL
YOUTH COLLECTIVE

What to say and what to avoid

The words you choose can either open up a conversation or accidentally shut it down. Here is how to swap well-meaning but dismissive phrases for validating, patient language.

Avoid saying...

'Just ignore them.'

Instead, try...

'That sounds really hard. I'm here for you.'

Why it works

It acknowledges their pain instead of treating it like it's easy to fix.

Avoid saying...

'You must report it right now!'

Instead, try...

'Have you thought about talking to someone? I could come with you if you want. There are other ways to report it.'

Why it works

It keeps your friend in control while offering practical support.

Avoid saying...

'It's not that big of a deal.'

Instead, try...

'I'm so sorry you're dealing with this. How are you holding up today?'

Why it works

It validates their experience without judging or minimising it.

'Reaching out for help is meant to be freedom. But there are so many factors that influence it: the number of friends you have, your popularity ranking. If you're known to not have many friends, you have fewer people who support you.'

– YOUNG PERSON, 15,
PROJECT ROCKIT NATIONAL
YOUTH COLLECTIVE

Avoid saying...

'You need to get help.'

Instead, try...

'You don't have to figure this out alone. There are other support services that you could reach out to for advice.'

Why it works

It's direct and empowering, and guides your friend towards support options

When a friend pushes support away

Sometimes people don't want help, even from the people who care about them the most. They might snap at you, ignore your texts or close off.

If your friend is pushing you away, let them know you are there when they are ready. You do not have to keep asking for a response or force them to talk. Give them space, but let them know you are there for them when they need you. A simple text can be a comfort, like, *'Hey, no need to reply to this, just wanted to let you know that I'm thinking of you and I'm here whenever you're ready to hang out'.*

If your friend has been bullied or harmed because of who they are, such as their race, gender, disability or any other identity-based factor, go to the **Australian Human Rights Commission** at humanrights.gov.au to learn about their rights and find support.



Know your limits

You are a friend, not a therapist or a crisis counsellor. It is important to recognise when a friend needs more support than you can provide.

Signs that your friend might need professional help include:

- ◉ talking about self-harm or giving up on life
- ◉ withdrawing from school, hobbies and friends
- ◉ changes in eating or sleeping habits or relying on bad habits to cope.

Encourage your friend to seek professional support without making them feel trapped or pressured.

You can say: *'I care about you so much, but this is really heavy and I want you to have the best help possible. Can we look into finding a counsellor or talking to a trusted adult together? You could also reach out to a support service for advice'.*



Note

You should also talk to a trusted adult or a support service listed in this resource if you are worried about your friend's wellbeing or safety. You don't need your friend's permission to seek support. However, it can be helpful to involve them in the conversation. This way, they still feel in control.

If the first person you tell does not help or take your concerns about your friend seriously, tell someone else. Keep trying until you find someone who listens. For more information on support systems, go to the connected resources or the organisations listed at the end of this resource.

'Having someone to rant to is not the same as having an authority figure you can go to for action. It's easier to find someone to vent to than to find someone who will take what you say seriously, and actually do something.'

– YOUNG PERSON, 16,
PROJECT ROCKIT NATIONAL
YOUTH COLLECTIVE

If you were there when harm happened

You were present when the bullying or harmful behaviour took place. Maybe you froze and did not know how to stop it. Maybe you're feeling guilty.

Supporting your friend now is a deeply meaningful step. You do not have to have been perfect in the past to show up for them today and try to make things better. If you feel that you have let them down, apologise and tell them that you are here for them moving forward. This shows your friend that you are there to support them. It can lead to a stronger relationship in the future.

What if it does not go to plan?

Even with the best intentions, conversations can still feel awkward, or your friend might react defensively. If things do not go perfectly, do not be too hard on yourself. Being a supportive friend is a learning process for both of you. You can always stop and take a break, apologise if something you said came across the wrong way, and reassure them that you are there to support them.

You can report harmful behaviour online to **eSafety** at esafety.gov.au/report.



Taking care of yourself

Supporting someone who has been harmed can affect your own wellbeing. You cannot support others well if you are not taking care of yourself.

- ⦿ **Boundaries are not a betrayal:** Setting boundaries around when you can talk and what you can handle does not mean that you do not care. It means you are keeping yourself well enough to keep supporting them over time.
- ⦿ **Do not absorb the pain:** Being a good friend means walking alongside someone through their pain. It does not mean absorbing their pain and making it your own.
- ⦿ **Protect your peace:** Make sure that you are getting enough sleep and doing things that bring you joy and help you relax. Talk to your own support network when things feel too heavy.

Summary

Supporting a friend through bullying or harmful behaviour is important, but you need to balance empathy with your own wellbeing. This resource offers a guide for you to show up effectively by listening without trying to 'fix' everything. It also shows you how to choose supportive language, respect boundaries when a friend distances themselves, and know when to involve a trusted adult or professional safely.

- ◉ **Show up without taking over:** Be present and comfortable with silence, instead of trying to fix the situation or minimise their pain.
- ◉ **What to say and what to avoid:** Swap dismissive advice (like *'just ignore them'*) for supportive, open questions and statements.
- ◉ **What if a friend pushes support away:** Let them know you are there for them when they are ready, without forcing them to talk.
- ◉ **Know your limits:** Recognise the signs that professional help or an adult is needed and involve your friend in that process if possible.
- ◉ **If you were there when harm happened:** Realise that you do not have to have been perfect in the moment to be a meaningful support right now.
- ◉ **Taking care of yourself:** Set healthy boundaries and remember that being a good friend does not mean taking on someone else's pain.

Connected resources

- ◉ Support systems
- ◉ Identity-based harm
- ◉ Why would I want to repair the relationship?

Where to get more help

If you need further support, help is available:

Kids Helpline: 1800 55 1800 or kidshelpline.com.au. Free, confidential counselling for bullying and other harmful behaviours, school issues, online harm and wellbeing, available 24/7.

Beyond Blue: 1300 22 4636 or beyondblue.org.au. Mental health support for stress, anxiety or overwhelm, available 24/7.

Lifeline: 13 11 14 or lifeline.org.au. Crisis support and counselling if things feel overwhelming, available 24/7.

Dolly's Dream Bullying Support Line: 13 36 55 (13 DOLLY) or dollysdream.org.au. Counselling and guidance for children and young people experiencing bullying and other harmful behaviour, available 24/7.

headspace/ehedspace: 1800 650 890 or headspace.org.au. Mental health, wellbeing and early intervention support, available 9 am–1 am daily.

1800RESPECT: 1800 737 732 or 1800respect.org.au. Sexual assault, family and domestic violence counselling line for anyone who has experienced, or is at risk of, family and domestic violence and/or sexual assault, available 24/7.

13YARN: 13 92 76 or 13yarn.org.au. Culturally safe 24/7 support for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people.

QLife (LGBTIQA+ young people): 1800 184 527 or qlife.org.au. Free, anonymous peer support and referral service, available 3 pm–9 pm daily.

eSafety Commissioner: esafety.gov.au. Report cyberbullying, get advice and request content removal support.

Australian Human Rights Commission: humanrights.gov.au. Support for cases involving discriminatory harm. Reports can be made via their website or by emailing infoservice@humanrights.gov.au.

State, territory and non-government education sectors will reflect the expectations of the National Framework for Addressing Bullying in Australian schools in their policies and procedures by Term 1 2027. This includes making reasonable efforts to initiate a response to bullying and harmful behaviour within two school days, recognising that further time may be required to fully address the issue. By Term 1 2027, all schools will also publish or link to policies and procedures that align with the National Framework (or equivalent contemporary jurisdiction specific Frameworks) and their local policies and school context.