

SUPPORTING A LOVED ONE

*experiencing mental distress
and/or illness*



Mental Health Foundation
mauri tū, mauri ora OF NEW ZEALAND

When someone you care about is experiencing mental distress

Almost half of us will experience mental distress and/or illness in our lifetimes. It is common for someone you care about to experience mental distress. The person may tell you directly how they are feeling, or you may sense that something isn't quite right.

Everyone's experience of mental distress is unique, but there are common themes. People in distress may feel anxious, sad and withdrawn, or irritable and angry. You might notice that they are avoiding activities that used to bring them joy. There may be changes in their sleep and eating patterns, or they might seem unable to cope with daily life. Their thinking might seem unsettled.

It can feel scary or intimidating to offer support to someone when they are experiencing mental distress. You may be worried you'll say or do the wrong thing. But offering caring and empathetic support can make a big difference.

Simply being there for the person you're supporting is one of the most important ways you can help them.

What is mental distress, and what is mental illness?

We all experience tough times in life that impact our mental health. People may notice a change in their thoughts, feelings and behaviours during this time, or may not feel like they are their 'usual selves'. These experiences of 'mental distress' can be long, very intense and/or significantly affect our lives, and can be similar to a mental illness, whether medically diagnosed or not.

A 'mental illness' by contrast is a formal mental health diagnosis from a health professional, such as depression, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD) or bipolar disorder.

You don't need special training to support someone, whether they have a formal diagnosis or not. You just need to be able to listen, reassure them that they're not alone and that you care about them, and remind them that support is available – and you can help them access that support.

If your friend or loved one is expressing suicidal thoughts, seek help straight away.

If you think someone may be suicidal, ask them. It could save their life. Talking about suicide will not put the thought in their head. Find out more about suicide prevention at mentalhealth.org.nz/suicide-prevention

How to find help and support

Encourage your friend or loved one to talk to someone – to you, to a trusted friend or whānau member, to a counsellor or health professional, or to a helpline.

*Free call or text **1737** for support from a counsellor, 24/7.
See [mentalhealth.org.nz/helplines](https://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/helplines) for more.*

Support your loved one to see a general practitioner (GP) – this step is key. Their GP may refer them to specialist mental health services.

If your loved one is diagnosed with a mental health condition, they may be prescribed **medication**. They may also be referred to other specialists, such as a psychologist, for **talking therapies**. Therapy can help your loved one explore and understand their emotions, thoughts and behaviours to improve their wellbeing and address their mental health concerns.

Many GP clinics have other supports such as health coaches or health improvement practitioners (HIPs) who can work with people. Other help available includes counselling, peer support groups (to connect with others who have similar experiences), and local mental health support services.

There are funded and low-cost ways to access therapy, such as workplace EAP programmes, ACC Sensitive Claims, local women's, men's and youth centres and more.

*Find information and support services at:
www.mentalhealth.org.nz/help
www.wellbeingsupport.health.nz*

Practical support is invaluable, as managing daily life can become overwhelming for people experiencing mental distress and/or illness. You can help by finding out about local health services, assisting with making appointments, and providing transport and childcare. You can also go to appointments with your loved one, and assist with taking notes and organising any relevant paperwork.

You can support your loved one to access financial support through Work and Income NZ, by helping them to fill out forms or make phone calls. Offering help with life admin might seem simple, but could lift a lot of stress from them.

Helping your loved one find **good quality information** about what strategies can work for them can be helpful. If they are diagnosed with a mental health condition, try learning about it. See [mentalhealth.org.nz/conditions](https://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/conditions) to find out more.

Strategies for your loved one

Recovery from mental distress and/or illness is not always straightforward. Sometimes it will be more about managing, and getting through. Below is a list of strategies you can share with the person you care about. You can offer to support them, or practise these strategies together.

Wellbeing strategies to manage distress

- Know your **support network** (whānau, friends, mental health practitioners and services). You don't have to do this alone.
- Reflect on your **early warning signs** or triggers, so you can reduce your exposure to stress.
- Develop **strategies** to use when you feel things are getting worse. Work with a trusted person and your doctor or therapist to make a plan for difficult times.
See mentalhealth.org.nz/safety-plan
- **Take care of yourself:** try to eat well, get enough sleep, and find ways to move your body. It's helpful if you can avoid using drugs and alcohol.
- **Connect** with cultural healing practices that are meaningful to you, such as karakia, mirimiri/massage and rongoā/natural medicines. Try **grounding activities** like meditation or breathing exercises.
- Spend time on activities that bring you **joy and purpose**, such as time in nature or creative hobbies (like music, art or kapa haka). Focusing on creating something is an important part of recovery for many.
- Try to stay **connected** and as **physically active** as works for you – every little bit helps. Also make sure you rest and pace yourself in your recovery.



Tips for supporting someone

Walking alongside someone experiencing mental distress and/or illness can be challenging at times. Your aroha and āwhina/support will make a huge difference.

- Remember they are going through difficult times. It takes time to understand there is a problem, and to accept help. **Be gentle** and let them know you are there for them.
- **Listen.** What is happening is very real for them. Try to listen with an open mind. It is important to validate their experiences and not to blame or judge.
- You don't need to have all the answers, or a solution. Listen and ask them how you can best support their needs.
- Encourage and support them to **seek treatment**, and to persevere with therapy and medication (if prescribed). Recovering from or managing their condition will be ongoing, and there may be ups and downs on the journey.
- **Make a plan** to have regular check-ins. Take note of how they are doing, and have a plan for who to turn to if things get worse.
- Encourage and support their autonomy and independence. Your loved one should be actively engaged in decision-making about their own life and care.
- **Take time out together.** Do something together you both enjoy, and just connect.

Look after your own wellbeing

You will need to look after yourself to make sure you have the energy, time and capacity to be there for your loved one. Ask friends and whānau for support, talk to a GP or therapist, and call a helpline to talk things through. Find out more at **mentalhealth.org.nz/wellbeing**

Set reasonable boundaries – you can't do everything. Be clear about what you can offer, and when to ask for help from others. Remember you can't change your loved one's experiences – be gentle with yourself.



Keep learning

To learn more about mental health, mental distress and/or illness, see websites such as **www.mentalhealth.org.nz**, **healthify.nz** and **depression.org.nz**

Online tools

Use free digital tools and support programmes available online. Check out **smallsteps.org.nz**, **aroawellbeing.co.nz**, **thelowdown.co.nz**, **headstrong.org.nz** or **justathought.co.nz**

In crisis?

If someone is in immediate physical danger, dial 111 or take them to the emergency department at your closest hospital. To call your local mental health crisis team, see **mentalhealth.org.nz/help**

Resources

The Mental Health Foundation has a range of free mental health and wellbeing information and resources. Visit **shop.mentalhealth.org.nz**

Find us online

Find out more about our work:

✉ **resource@mentalhealth.org.nz**

🌐 **www.mentalhealth.org.nz**

📷 **[mhfnz](https://www.instagram.com/mhfnz)**

📘 **[mentalhealthfoundationNZ](https://www.facebook.com/mentalhealthfoundationNZ)**

Disclaimer

This brochure should not be used in place of an accurate mental health diagnosis or assessment. If you think you may have a mental health condition or would like further information or support, please talk to your GP or Māori health provider.

We need your help

To create free resources like this, we rely on the generosity of people like you.

Donate now to support our work uplifting the mental health of all New Zealanders.

Please give today at **donate.mentalhealth.org.nz**



This resource was produced with input from many people. Special thanks go to Dr Joanna Macfarlane, Stable Psychology (**www.stablepsychology.me**), as well as our team members with lived experience.

The Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand, 2025. Last updated May 2026.