

FOR TEENAGERS

You don't have to explain it properly

*About not being okay, not finding the words, and managing to ask
for help anyway.*

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Na Rota do Afeto
capacitando e interagindo pelo mundo

If it's right now

If you're in a bad place at this moment, start here. The rest can wait.

Find a helpline where you are

Most countries have a free, confidential line you can call or text at any hour.

Write the number for your country on the **Local contacts** page at the end of this booklet, and keep it in your phone.

You don't have to be in crisis to call. You don't have to know how to explain. You don't need a reason that sounds big enough. You can call just because you feel bad.

If you are in danger right now, or if you've already done something to hurt yourself: call your local emergency number, or go to the nearest emergency department. And ask someone to stay with you until then.

If you can, tell an adult. If you can't speak, send a message. If you can't write anything, send just: **“not okay, come here”**. That's enough.

Why it's so hard to say

It isn't you being dramatic, and it isn't lack of trying.

Sometimes the word doesn't exist

Some people feel things very intensely and still can't name them. You know it's bad, you know it's big, but if someone asks “what are you feeling?”, nothing comes. That has a name, it happens a lot, and it doesn't mean you aren't feeling anything.

Sometimes the body warns first

Stomach ache, tightness in the chest, a knot in the throat, tiredness that sleep doesn't fix. Or the opposite: you feel nothing in your body and conclude it isn't serious. Both of those exist.

Sometimes you've learnt to look fine

If you've spent years practising looking like everything is okay — at school, in front of your family, in therapy — you've probably got very good at it. So good that nobody notices. And then you conclude that nobody cares, when in fact nobody is seeing.

And sometimes you already tried, and it didn't work

You said something and were told you were exaggerating. You told someone and it became gossip. You asked for help and nothing changed. It's reasonable not to want to try again. But **the wrong person is not proof that everyone is the wrong person.**

When it's time to tell

There is no minimum amount of suffering required to ask for help. But there are signs that it's past time.

- It's been **weeks**, not days.
- It's getting in the way of **sleeping, eating or concentrating.**
- You've stopped doing things you liked — including the ones that used to be your refuge.
- You're pulling away from everyone.
- You think others would be better off if you weren't here.
- You think about disappearing, vanishing, or not being alive.
- You've been hurting yourself, or thinking about it.

The last three

If any of those is your case, **don't wait to get better on your own.** Talk to someone today. It can be a helpline, it can be an adult, it can be both.

One thing that is true and that you may not be able to see right now: **this changes.** Not because someone told you to think positive — but because emotional states do change, and with help they change faster.

How to start the conversation

The hardest part is usually the first sentence. So take a ready-made one.

If you're going to speak

- “I need to tell you something and I don't know how to explain it.”
- “I haven't been okay for a while.”
- “Can we talk? It's not about school.”
- “Do you have a minute? It's serious.”

If you're going to message

Messaging counts. It is no less valid than saying it to someone's face. Sometimes it's the only way that works.

- “I need to tell you something but it's hard to say out loud. Can I write it?”
- “I'm not okay. I can't explain. I'm just not okay.”
- “Can you come here?”

If you don't speak, or can't always speak

Writing it on paper and handing it over counts. Using your board, your app, your signs counts. Pointing counts. Sending a voice note counts. Showing this page and pointing at a sentence counts.

You don't have to have it sorted out first

You don't need to know the reason, you don't need an explanation that makes sense, you don't need to be calm. You can arrive confused, mid-meltdown, unable to finish the sentence. **Organising it is the adult's job — not yours.**

If the adult doesn't take you seriously

It happens. And it is not a sign that you were wrong to tell.

Some people minimise out of not knowing what to do, others out of fear, others because they're covering up that they're out of their depth. None of that changes what you're feeling.

- **Try another one.** That's why it's worth having more than one name in mind: someone in the family, someone at school, someone outside both.
- **Be more direct the second time.** “I'm not okay and I need real help” is different from “I've been a bit down”.
- **Say what you need**, if you know: “I need to see a psychologist”, “I need you to take me to a clinic”, “I need you to stay with me today”.
- **Look outside the family** if inside isn't possible: a counsellor, a teacher you trust, the school office, a health centre.
- **And call a helpline.** You don't depend on anyone's permission for that.

A list worth making now

Three people you could turn to, and how to reach each one:

When it's a friend who tells you

It's probably happened already, or it will.

When someone is in a very bad place, the first person to know is almost always a friend. Not an adult. And that's an enormous weight to carry at 14, 15, 16.

- ✓ **Listen.** You don't need an answer or the right thing to say. Being there is already a lot.
- ✓ **Take it seriously.** Even if it sounds exaggerated. Even if they later say they were joking.
- ✓ **Ask directly** if you're genuinely worried. Asking doesn't put the idea in anyone's head — it usually brings relief to someone who was alone with it.
- ✓ **Tell an adult.** Even if they asked you to keep it secret.
- ✓ **Stay with them** if the danger is now, and call for help from wherever you are.

About secrets

There are secrets you keep. And there are secrets that hurt the person keeping them and put someone at risk. **Those get told.**

Telling isn't betrayal. You can even say it first: *"I won't spread it around. I'm going to tell one person who can help."*

And one more thing: **it is not your job to keep someone alive.** You're a friend, not the treatment. Bringing in an adult is what takes that weight off you — and it's what actually helps.

If it's about food, or if you've been hurting yourself

These two rarely get written about in a way that doesn't sound like a lecture. I'll try.

Food

If your relationship with eating has become something that takes up the whole day — rules, counting, guilt, fear, relief, shame, and all of it again tomorrow — **that has a name and it has treatment.**

Your weight doesn't matter here. It doesn't matter if you think it isn't serious. It doesn't matter if someone told you that you look fine. If it's consuming you, that's reason enough to get help.

And if you're autistic and have always eaten very few things because of texture, smell or routine — that's something else, and it also deserves to be understood rather than dismissed. Both exist, and sometimes they overlap. A team that knows the subject can tell them apart.

If you've been hurting yourself

You've probably been told it's for attention. It probably isn't — and even if part of it were communication, **needing to reach that point in order to be heard is itself reason enough for someone to take care of you.**

I'm not going to tell you to promise you'll stop. A promise isn't treatment, and breaking one only makes people hide more.

What I will say is this: it usually shows up when the pain gets too big to fit into words. And there is help to make that pain smaller — which is very different from someone just telling you to stop.

You don't have to be bad enough

Both of these improve much more when treatment starts early. Waiting to get worse in order to feel entitled to ask for help is the longest and hardest route.

If it's a friend

- ✓ **Don't comment on their body.** Not to compliment, not to worry. Talk about what they're feeling.
- ✓ **Don't become the monitor.** Watching what someone eats or checking for marks pushes them away and fixes nothing.
- ✓ **Don't hold it alone.** This is too big for two teenagers to carry.
- ✓ **Tell an adult,** even if they ask you not to.

Things that don't help

If you've heard any of these, the problem wasn't you.

- ✗ “You have everything — what are you complaining about?”
- ✗ “Other people have it much worse.”
- ✗ “It's all in your head.”
- ✗ “You're just after attention.”
- ✗ “We didn't have this in my day.”
- ✗ “Just get off your phone.”

None of those sentences describes what you feel. They describe the discomfort of someone who didn't know what to say.

Something nobody may have told you

Asking for help isn't a sign that you're weak, or that you failed to sort it out alone. It's the hardest thing to do — and you can only do it if you have some strength.

You don't have to explain it properly to be helped. You only have to say you're not okay.

This booklet offers guidance on care and communication. It is not legal advice and does not describe the laws or services of any particular country. Procedures for reporting and for hearing a child differ between countries — always check what applies where you are.

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Local contacts

Fill this page in with the services available where you are.

Every country organises child protection differently. Before you need them, find out which of these exist near you and write them down here.

Emergency number

Child protection authority

Police / specialised unit

Health service

Free legal assistance

School contact

Other notes
