



Concerned about a Friend or Relative?

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When you're really worried about another person, every day of your own life can feel as if you're on a roller coaster ride. You're preoccupied, and you never know what's coming next. The only thing you know with certainty is that you feel helpless, as if your own life has become inextricably intertwined with the other person's life in a way that feels beyond your control and comfort zone.

So how (if at all) should you express your concern to the other person? Should you do it alone, or should you enlist your friends/relatives to help you? When is the best time to say something? And after you've said something, what should you expect the other person to do about it? The following pointers might prove helpful:*

- (1) **ENLISTING OTHERS.** You might know others who share your concerns, and you might want to enlist their help. One caveat regarding the "group intervention" approach is that the person of concern might feel as if others are ganging up on him or her. An alternative approach is to first discuss the situation as a group, before anyone speaks with the person of concern, and then have one person individually approach him or her for a one-on-one conversation. If that approach proves unsuccessful, then others can try their luck with him or her on an individual or small-group basis.
- (2) **TIMING.** There's no single, perfect time to have a difficult conversation. It's not an exact science. Nevertheless, it's advisable to avoid such conversations when emotions (yours and/or the other person's) are running high, such as after an argument or when you're feeling frustrated. You're more likely to receive a favorable response when both of you are cool, calm, and collected.
- (3) **WHAT TO SAY.** This is the biggest challenge facing most people who are concerned about a friend or relative. It's also one of the most useful things that might emerge after speaking with a BSC academic counselor; together you can come up with sensible, sensitive language, and you can even role-play the situation with an academic counselor to get some practice having the conversation. There's no single, correct thing to say. But you'll want to be clear, empathic, and understanding without being directive or judgmental. For example, you might begin a conversation with something like this:

"So, I want you to know that I'm really concerned about [*issue*]. I'm happy to go into detail, and if now's not a good time to talk, then when can we talk about it? This might be totally *my* issue – I might be way off-base here – but it's definitely on *my* mind, so at least just humor me and indulge me, please."

And you might end a conversation with something like this:

"I just want you to know that I'm here for you if and when you want to talk more or take some action steps. And I also want to give you a heads-up that I'll probably bring this up again if it continues to be on my mind."

- (4) **RESISTANCE.** Anticipating potential resistance from the person of concern can be the most powerful deterrent to expressing your concerns. No matter how gently or tactfully you express yourself, the other person might become defensive, angry, or upset. You can't control the other person's response. So anticipate resistance, and remind yourself beforehand that this is okay. Ask yourself, "If I'm being true to myself, what would I rather have happen – enduring the other person's becoming temporarily upset at me, or sitting silently as a bystander and then feeling awful if something really bad happens and I know I never

* **NOTE:** This handout is not referring to emergency situations in which someone's life is at risk here and now. If you have reason to think someone's physical safety is at immediate risk, it is *not* the time to express concern in the ways presented here – that can wait until later. You first need to take action to help that person get connected with people who can help that person get/remain safe.

said or did enough?" If the other person truly cares about you, then the person will forgive you once the dust settles, because he or she will realize that you're coming from an honest and genuine place.

(5) OUTCOME: LETTING GO. As much as you desperately want to make things better – to resolve them – in reality, the situation is completely beyond your direct control. Why? Because you can't magically make other people say, do, think, or feel the way you want them to, in the same way that you can't magically cure a physical disease or illness. In most cases, all you can do is say what's on your mind as comfortably, appropriately as possible and with as well-timed an approach as possible. And when you have little or no control over a situation, then you should have few or no expectations about the outcome. Having unrealistically high expectations – for example, if you say to yourself, "As soon as we tell her, she'll take our advice and change" – is setting yourself up for disappointment, frustration, and failure. Remember, *all* you can do is express yourself. The rest is up to the other person.

The talking points and thinking points in this document can hopefully help to guide you through a situation in which you're worried about another person. However, this handout is no substitute for having a private, free conversation with an academic counselor at Bureau of Study Counsel to discuss your specific situation. You can come alone or with friends – whatever feels most comfortable. And if you choose to meet with a BSC academic counselor, you needn't reveal any identifying information about the other person (name, etc.); you can provide as much or as little information as you wish. *So if you're sitting alone with this issue, trying to figure out what to do, please consider making an appointment to see an academic counselor at the Bureau of Study Counsel!*