

Dos and Don'ts of Being an Ally to Students with Mental Illness

DO...

Listen. One of the simplest yet most important ways to be an ally is to listen. Like all students, **students with mental illness** need to feel comfortable expressing themselves. If a student comes to talk to you about being harassed, feeling excluded or just about their life in general, keep in mind that you may be the only person they feel safe speaking to. Be there to listen.

Respect confidentiality. Effective allies will respect their students' confidentiality and privacy. Someone who is **disclosing his or her mental illness** may not want everyone to know. Assume that the person only told you and just wants you to know, unless they indicate otherwise. Informing others can create an unsafe environment for the student. **However, there may be instances when confidentiality must be broken to keep people safe.** If a student expresses suicidal or homicidal ideation, it is your responsibility to alert appropriate support groups or resources, such as the campus counseling center or National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (1-800-273-TALK; www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org).

Be conscious of your biases. Effective allies acknowledge how **stereotypes and prejudice (including fear of individuals with mental illness), and discrimination** may affect their efforts to be an ally to **students with mental illness**. They continually work to recognize and challenge their own biases.

Seek out knowledge. Effective allies periodically brush up on current issues facing the community of **people with mental illness**.

Be a resource. An effective ally will also know when and how to refer students to outside help.

DON'T...

Think you have all the answers. Do not feel you must always have the answers. If you are faced with a problem you don't know how to solve, let the student know you will look into the subject to try and find an answer. Sometimes the best thing for you to do is to refer the student to an outside source that may be able to help them. You may be able to provide them with a list of resources on or around campus.

Make unrealistic promises. Be careful not to promise something you may not be able to deliver. This can damage the relationship you have with the student as an ally.

Make assumptions. It is important to avoid making assumptions and perpetuating stereotypes. These can be extremely offensive and may turn a student away from you. It is also important to avoid assuming you know what the student needs. Be sure to listen to the student and ask how you can support them.