Start with connection

Distress is not always visible. Someone may withdraw, become irritable, struggle with ordinary tasks or appear unusually quiet. These changes can have many causes; approach with curiosity rather than assuming you know what has happened.

Notice without judging

Choose a private, comfortable moment. Describe what you have noticed rather than labelling the person. For example: “I have noticed you seem quieter lately. Would you like some company?”

Listen without trying to fix everything

Allow time for an answer. Acknowledge feelings without demanding details or comparing experiences. Silence can be welcome. Ask whether they would prefer listening, practical help or space.

Respect choice

Offer manageable options: a short walk, a message later or help with one task. Accept a refusal without withdrawing kindness. Never pressure someone to describe trauma.

How could I start a supportive conversation?

Respond to distress and check safety

When someone is overwhelmed, fewer words and clear choices may be easier to process. Ask before touching, moving closer or changing their surroundings. If there is actual danger, prioritise practical safety rather than grounding alone.

Offer steady support

Speak at an unhurried pace. Ask what has helped before. Offer a quieter space, water or a familiar activity if wanted. Avoid insisting on breathing exercises or eye contact.

Ask directly about safety

If you are concerned about suicide or self-harm, ask clearly and compassionately whether they are thinking about harming themselves or ending their life. Listen and take their answer seriously. Do not promise secrecy about immediate danger.

Know when to seek help

In the UK, call 999 or go to A&E; if someone is in immediate danger or has seriously harmed themselves. For urgent mental health support without immediate danger, contact NHS 111. Samaritans can be reached on 116 123. Encourage professional support and offer to help make contact if wanted.

What support could I offer, and who could help if I become concerned?

Support without carrying everything alone

Being supportive does not mean being available at every moment or becoming responsible for another person’s recovery. Consistent, realistic support can be more helpful than promises that cannot be sustained.

Agree a manageable next step

Ask what would make today easier. Help with a meal, appointment, transport or a simple message if welcomed. Agree when to check in again rather than expecting an immediate improvement.

Protect your own capacity

Notice your own tiredness, worry or frustration. Set kind, clear boundaries: “I can talk this evening, but I cannot be available overnight.” Seek support for yourself without unnecessarily sharing their private information.

Build a wider support network

Encourage contact with trusted people, a GP or a mental health professional. Where abuse or coercion may be present, respect the person’s choices and seek specialist advice about safe support.

What can I realistically offer, and what boundaries do I need?

General wellbeing guidance, not a substitute for individual professional or emergency support.