How to help: A guide for friends

Concerning signs:
When a friend is struggling, you may notice some of the following signs:

• Changes in sleep, eating patterns, or weight
• Physical aches and pains and/or lack of energy
• Loss of interest in activities
• Depressed mood
• Decreased motivation
• Comments about suicide or death
• Excessive tension or worry
• Restlessness, irritability, hyperactivity, pressured speech
• Excessive alcohol or drug use
• Decline in academic performance; drop in class attendance
• Social withdrawal
• Self-injury (e.g., cutting, scratching, or burning)
• Unusual or exaggerated response to certain events (e.g., overly suspicious, excessively agitated, or easily startled)

What is your role?
It’s understandable that you’re concerned, but what is your role in this situation?

Involve yourself only as much as you are willing or comfortable. At times, in an attempt to reach or help a troubled friend, you may become more involved than your time or skill permits. It is important to know your boundaries and limitations and to know when you need help.

Discuss your concerns with your friend directly
If you are willing and comfortable, consider the following tips:

Talk to your friend privately. This may help minimize embarrassment and defensiveness.

Be HONEST and SPECIFIC about your concerns. Explain why you want to talk. Example: "I am really worried about how you are doing. It seems like you might be depressed and I want to try to understand what is going on for you."

Describe your OBSERVATIONS in a non-judgmental way.
Example: "For the past two weeks, I’ve noticed that you spend a lot of time in bed, you don’t seem to enjoy spending time with anyone, you’re not going to class, I hear you crying in your room, and you’re drinking a lot more than you used to."

Express your FEELINGS.
Example: "I care about you and I am really worried seeing you like this."

Offer your RECOMMENDATIONS.
Example: "I wish I could make this better for you, but I don’t have the training to be most
helpful to you. I think it is a good idea for you to talk to someone like your House Advisor or someone at the Counseling Service... whomever you feel most comfortable with. I'll go with you if you like.

You don’t have to do it alone!
Consultations at the Counseling Service are free and confidential. A counselor can help you identify options to help your friend and provide support for you as well. Depending on the issue, the counselor may suggest that you inform someone (e.g., an administrator or parent) who can take action to directly address the problem and help the student in need. In emergency situations (i.e., when a student may be in immediate danger) the counselor may alert specific people to protect the student’s safety.

If you are not comfortable talking with your friend directly or the person is unwilling to follow your referral recommendations, it is important that you share your concern with others.

The Student of Concern Team (SOC) meets regularly to proactively identify, support and monitor students who are exhibiting moderate to elevated levels of distress, academic or residential life disruption, other significant mental or physical health issues, or becoming a risk of harming themselves or others.

Alert the Student of Concern team about your concern:
http://vassar.edu/studentofconcern

Contacting the Counseling Service
Appointments at the Counseling Service can be made by calling 845.437.5700 or stopping by Metcalf House.

If your need to speak with a counselor is urgent, please contact the Counseling Service during the business day (9am-5pm, M-F) and indicate that you need to speak to a counselor right away. For emergency consultation outside of normal business hours, please call 845.437.7333. Please see the ‘Need Help?’ section on our website to determine the appropriate person/department/agency to contact during an urgent situation. The Counselor-on-call is available when residence houses are open to all students. Please contact local emergency services when Counselor-on-call is not available.