

HOW TO

HELP

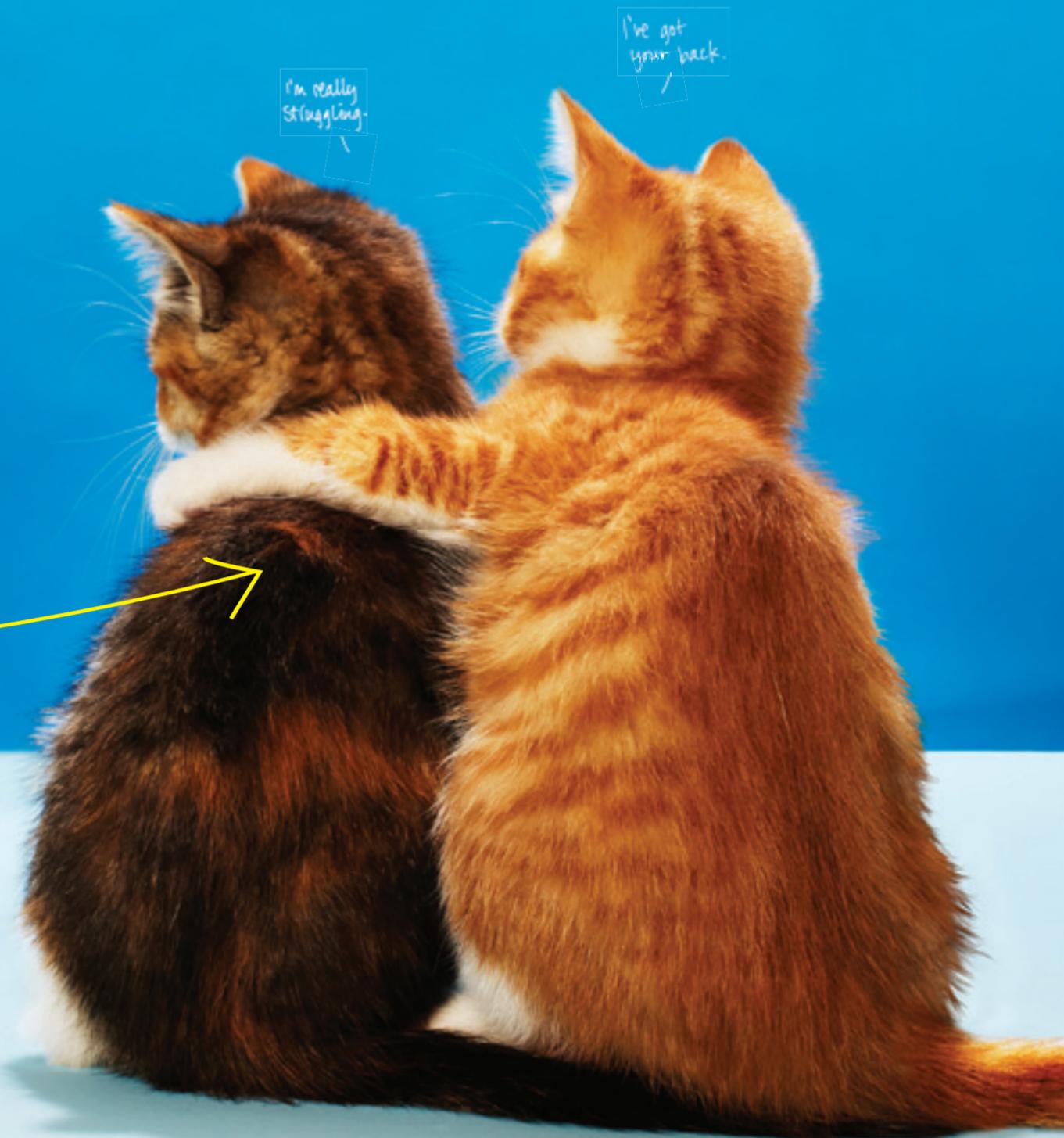
A FRIEND

When a close pal is going through something really tough, you want to be there for her, but you don't feel sure about how to approach her or what support she needs. We talked to some real BFFs who've been there to pinpoint exactly how you can be Friend of the Year when your bud really needs you.

BY ANDREA BARTZ PHOTOGRAPHED BY EMILY KATE ROEMER

IN

TROUBLE





SHE HAS A SELF-DESTRUCTIVE HABIT

Kirsten G.*, 24, Minneapolis, MN, and Kimberly Martinez, 22, Savage, MN

KIRSTEN When I was 14, my doctor diagnosed me with ADHD and gave me a prescription for Adderall. I started taking the Adderall right around the same time I began partying at night with friends. That kicked off a seven-year struggle with Adderall addiction and alcoholism that got much worse when I started college. I flunked out of my freshman year because I was drinking so much, and I had to start over somewhere new. I was drinking and taking pills every day, and no one really wanted to be around me anymore. It was gross.

KIMBERLY Kirsten and I were roommates for a study-abroad program during our junior year. We had similar personalities and got along really well, but I did notice that she drank a ton and seemed to live on the edge. By the end of the program, I was worried about her—I'd seen her falling over and out of control too many times.

KIRSTEN I knew I had a problem, but I didn't know what to do about it. Some of my best friends cut me off instead of trying to talk to me, which was painful. And the people I partied with were drinking and using like I was, so I couldn't see how much I needed to change.

KIMBERLY I wanted to confront Kirsten about her addiction, but I was so scared I'd say the wrong thing. So I tried just to be there for her and talk to her about her goals and dreams and all the stuff she wanted to accomplish.

KIRSTEN When I was 21, I finally decided I needed to get sober, so I went through a program at the Hazelden treatment center in Plymouth, Minnesota. Kim was so supportive and even wrote me letters while I was in treatment. She never made me feel judged, and now when we go out, she rarely drinks so that I won't feel uncomfortable. Kim just genuinely cares about me, which means so much to me.

*Last name withheld to protect privacy.

How You Can Help

First, the bad news: You can't force a friend to get help, says J. Wesley Boyd, MD, a psychiatrist at Harvard Medical School. Your role is to help her realize that she *needs* help.

DO CONFRONT HER CALMLY. Stick to the facts and refrain from judgment, Dr. Boyd says—"I think you have a problem" will just stoke her denial, while "You were black-out drunk the last three nights in a row" is harder to refute. Emphasize her well-being to remind her that you're not just throwing shade: "I want to make sure you're going to be okay six months from now, and I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I didn't bring this up." And of course, you should broach the topic when she's sober. "You want to do everything you can to keep emotions down

so that your friend will be more likely to hear what you're telling her," he adds.

DON'T BE INVOLVED IN THE COVER-UP. If your friend has a problem with alcohol, you might be tempted to volunteer to be her designated driver, or you may want to just be nice when she asks, "Did I embarrass myself last night?" Don't. "You're enabling the behavior by doing anything that makes it easier for her," Dr. Boyd says.

DO BE READY TO SUGGEST NEXT STEPS. "If you're lucky enough to break through to her and she tells you she needs help, she has a lot of options, depending on her personality," Dr. Boyd says. A Narcotics Anonymous or AA support group could be a good fit. "Their only requirement is a desire to stop," and you'd be welcome to attend with her, he says. She could also contact her primary-care doctor or a local treatment center.



SHE GETS A SCARY DIAGNOSIS



Ruthie Lowery, 29, and Jemika Crayton, 31, both Atlanta, GA

JEMIKA In 2010, I was in North Carolina, working on my master's degree, and I developed a swollen, painful stomach—I looked like I was pregnant. I knew something was wrong, but I put off going to the doctor until a friend caught me throwing up and took me to the ER. I was transferred to another hospital, and after reviewing a round of tests, a doctor walked into my room with tears in her eyes and said, "Sweetheart, you have stage-4 ovarian cancer." I didn't feel that scared because, on some level, I felt like I already knew.

RUTHIE I remember exactly where I was when I got the call—I was in Atlanta, getting my hair done. I was shocked, then numb, then I started to worry like crazy.

JEMIKA I underwent chemotherapy, and the treatments took a toll on me—I went from a size 16 to an 8 in a couple of months.

me!" When Ruthie did visit, she was so sweet. She lay with me on the bed, and once she brought me makeup and head scarves after I told her I missed them. Ten months after that first diagnosis, the doctor told me I was cancer-free, and Ruthie was so excited for me. She never stopped being there for me as a friend.

How You Can Help

Your friend needs a cheerleader, not more medical-ese, to help her through, says Jan C. Buckner, MD, chair of medical oncology at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota.

DO ASK HOW YOU CAN HELP. "Some people cope by not talking about it; others want to share emotions," Dr. Buckner says. "Meet her where she is."

DON'T INSIST, "YOU'RE GOING TO BE FINE!" It's important to give your friend real hope. Say, "Whatever happens, I'm here for you. We're going to do everything we can to help you beat this."

DO VOLUNTEER TO HELP. Medical visits take time away from your friend's normal activities. "Pitch in and say, 'Can I go to the doctor with you? Can I help with the housework? Can I bring over some dinner?'" Dr. Buckner suggests.

DON'T OFFER ADVICE. Unless you're an expert in your friend's diagnosis, leave it to the doctors to explain the best options. "There are many opinions about how to treat cancer, and some are based in fact while others are hype," Dr. Buckner says. Volunteer to research the best cancer-treatment centers, and leave the rest to the pros.



SHE LOSES HER JOB

Ashley King, 34, and Melissa Tiry, 30, both New York City

ASHLEY I worked in online advertising at a start-up, and I was let go in a round of layoffs. As you get older and are paid more, you realize that companies can sometimes hire people right out of college on the cheap to do what you do. It's really scary to have your income shut off right when you finally have a plan and a savings account and are taking care of yourself. And when you work crazy hours with a group of coworkers, they become like your family, and it's tough to see them go too.

MELISSA Ashley and I have been through this a few times, first when she lost another job in 2008 and then when I quit my job to do something new a few years later. People hear, "Oh, I lost my job," and they give you this face and go, "Ohhh, I'm so sorry!" It's obnoxious. So this time around, I told her, "I'm super sorry, and I've got your back," and then I let her decide if she wanted to talk about it.

ASHLEY I don't want the pity face. I want someone to tell me, "Gimme a break. You'll have a new job in no time. Enjoy the break while it lasts. Remember how you always wanted to travel?" Losing your job is kind of like getting dumped—you remember all the great things about the relationship and forget that he was lazy or had the grossest eating habits or whatever. Melissa knows how all-encompassing my job was and all the ridiculous things I had to deal with, so when I'm getting moody, she's like, "Remember all those things you hated? You were on your way out the door anyway!"

How You Can Help

"With a layoff comes the loss of two major things: a daily routine and a big part of one's identity," says Robert Chohe, PhD, the founder of the Career and Personal Development Institute in San Francisco. The right support will help your bud get back on her feet.

DON'T START WITH A FLOOD OF ADVICE. "The person who's been laid off is going through a ton of emotions—frustration, anxiety, and even grief," Chohe says. She needs to vent about it before she can think about next steps, and that might take a while. For the first week or two, lend a sympathetic ear.

DO PUT HER IN A POSITIVE FRAME OF MIND. Once your friend is ready to talk about the future, ask her what skills she gained in her last gig and what connections she can tap into (from friends, family, and even former coworkers) to kick-start her job search. "Once she articulates her strengths and sees the team behind her, she'll feel more hopeful," Chohe says.

DON'T ASK HER TO SPEND MONEY. "Funemployment" means plenty of free time but fewer resources to spend. Your bud will appreciate invitations to fun, cost-free activities, like concerts in the park or pay-what-you-wish nights at a museum.

DO CHALLENGE HER TO THINK BIG. "Get your friend to talk about her fantasies—around travel, jobs, relationships, whatever," Chohe says. "Thinking about what else matters helps remind her that there's more to her than just having a job."

MELISSA It's so important to be positive. When I was unemployed, people would panic for me: "What about this, what about that, what are you going to do?!" That just makes the situation worse. Moving forward is the best thing you can help a friend to do.

PROPS/STYLING: SARAH DAVIN/HAMLIN KITTENS COURTESY ANIMAL CARE AND CONTROL OF NYC. FOR INFORMATION ON ADOPTIONS, PLEASE GO TO NYCACC.ORG.

FROM LEFT: COURTESY SUBJECTS (2); ALESSANDRA PETLIN/VAUGHAN HANNIGAN.



SOMEONE CLOSE TO HER DIES

Katie Skocir, 26, Brookfield, WI, and Nicole Stahl, 27, Milwaukee, WI

NICOLE A few days before Christmas in 2010, my family and boyfriend and I were up waiting for my 19-year-old sister, Holly, who was driving home from college. It was storming that night, and when we got a call telling us that she had been in a car accident and later learned she hadn't made it, I just fell to the floor and kept saying, "What do I do? I don't know what to do!"

KATIE Nicole's boyfriend called me a few hours later to break the news, and my mind just went blank. Her family is like my family, and it just didn't seem real. I asked how Nicole was doing, but I knew there was no good answer to that.

NICOLE The next day, a lot of people found out via the news, so the e-mails and texts and Facebook messages started pouring in. I really appreciated them, even though I didn't really respond to any. We started going through old photos for the memorial service, and Katie came over to help. A bunch of the pictures were actually really funny, and we spent some time telling stories about Holly.

KATIE Over the next few weeks, I sometimes sent Nicole funny text messages about little things I knew she'd get a kick out of (like when I found my boyfriend's stash of Barbra Streisand CDs). I wasn't really afraid to joke with her because I figured we should both just be ourselves. I tried my best to keep our normal friendship going.

NICOLE Some people avoided me—I guess because they didn't know what to say—but I wish they



would've just acted normally. I had this weird compulsion to tell everyone I bumped into what had happened so that they'd know I wasn't totally myself, but it created some awkward situations—like, I blurted it out to a former coworker at a bar, and she had no idea what to say.

KATIE I pulled Nicole into a corner, and we both shed a tear and then shared a laugh and just went on with the evening. If we had to cry at bars, then we'd do it! That was okay with us.

NICOLE A few weeks after the funeral, my family started a scholarship foundation in Holly's name (HCSLoveLife.org), and friends pitched in to buy bracelets and even plan fund-raisers. That meant a lot to my family and gave people something to do to help.

How You Can Help

In a way, grief is like the flu. "At first, it can feel like it'll never go away," says George Bonanno, PhD, a psychologist at Columbia University and author of *The Other Side of Sadness: What the New Science of Bereavement Tells Us About Life After Loss*, "but acute pain usually begins to fade after a few weeks." Here's how to help during those first tear-soaked months.

DON'T FORCE HER TO TALK ABOUT IT. In general, people want to grieve with their families but be normal around their friends—"They want to feel like the world hasn't completely collapsed," Bonanno says. After giving your

condolences, chatting about unrelated things isn't disrespectful. It's actually kind.

DO EXPECT HER TO BE KIND OF ABSENT. "Sadness makes someone turn inward," Bonanno says. "People oscillate in and out of grief, so you may notice that while you're with her, she suddenly gets quiet for a few minutes and then comes out of it and is laughing." No need to probe her about what she's thinking. Just carry on as if you didn't even notice.

DON'T FEEL YOU NEED TO BE SOMBER AROUND HER. "People are able to laugh and feel genuine joy while mourning," Bonanno says. Your friend does not want to feel like she's sucked the joy out of everyone else's lives. Don't be afraid to joke or be your normal silly self (while still being respectful, of course).