

How to Be an Ally to a Student in Recovery

Educate Yourself

Be aware.

There are people with many identities on campus, including “in recovery.” Learn about their experiences and how you might educate others.

Promote acceptance.

Listen to their recovery story and validate their experiences and feelings. Refuse the urge to judge negatively.

Learn where recovery resources are on campus.

Share those resources if you see someone who is struggling with an substance use disorder or in early recovery and seeking support.

Know the difference between substance-free and sober/recovery housing.

One is a lifestyle choice. The other is for students in recovery from a substance use disorder.

Create Supportive Spaces

Use appropriate language.

Words like “substance abuse” and “dependence” tend to be stigmatizing and are increasingly avoided. Be mindful and use affirming terminology like “SUD recovery.” Learn more about the language of addiction and why words matters when discussing recovery.

Choose not to drink or use substances.

Plan social activities that don't include alcohol and other substances. There are potential risks when you drink alcohol or use substances around someone in recovery.

Provide alcohol-free beverages at events.

Offer drinks other than water and make them appealing so that students in recovery don't feel like an afterthought.



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Check In

Ask a student about their mental health.

If you're genuinely worried, you can make a referral to a campus resource, such as Student Care and Outreach.

Note when they seem unlike themselves.

If you're worried somebody's returning to use, do not be afraid to name it. Ask: "Are you using substances again?" Learn about the signs and triggers for relapse.

Ask: "How's your recovery going?"

Knowing that they are not alone in their recovery can be helpful.

Remember important dates or university breaks that may be challenging.

Ask: "We're coming up on the holidays and that can be hard for anybody. How are you doing?"

Be There to Help

Offer support and assistance.

If they say they've slipped up, help them find/connect with an addiction counselor or other treatment setting.

If someone is drinking or using substances again and want to stop, help them access emergency care.

Alcohol or drug withdrawal can be a life-threatening emergency. Individuals may need medical help and access to lifesaving medication such as naloxone, which can be used to reverse the effects of an opioid overdose.

If you're worried or concerned, ask if they're suicidal.

Shame and fear of failure can lead to suicidal thoughts. Individuals in recovery may be afraid to talk about their mental health without being asked directly.

Sources:

Eric Beeson, faculty member, Counseling@Northwestern

Tamarah Gehlen, director of the StepUP Program at Augsburg University in Minneapolis

Kristen Harper, expert and advocate for collegiate recovery

Tim Rabolt, executive director of the Association of Recovery in Higher Education (ARHE)