

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 experience 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.

Create Supportive Spaces

Use appropriate language.

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

Choose not to drink or do drugs.

Plan social activities that don’t include alcohol and drugs. There are risks when you drink or do drugs around someone in recovery.

Check In

Ask a student about their mental health. If you’re genuinely worried, you can make a referral to a campus resource.

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 doing drugs again?” Learn about the signs and triggers for relapse.

Be There to Help

Offer to take them back to treatment.

If they say they’ve slipped up, help them find an addiction counselor or other treatment setting.

If someone is drinking or using drugs again and they want to stop, help them access emergency room support.

People can die from alcohol or drug withdrawal and need medical help and access to lifesaving medication such as naloxone, which can be used to reverse the effects of an opioid overdose.

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 an SUD.

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.

Ask: “How’s your recovery going?” Knowing that they are not alone in their recovery can be helpful.

Remember important dates or events that may be challenging. Ask: “We’re coming up on the holidays and that can be hard for anybody. How are you doing?”

Help them find the words to ask for help.

If they don’t know how to say it, tell them how: “I’m struggling with substance use or with chemical use.”

If you’re worried, ask if they’re suicidal.

Shame and fear of failure can lead to suicidal thoughts, but people in recovery may be afraid to talk about it without being asked.

Sources:

Eric Beeson, core faculty member at 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)