When it comes time to talk to a buddy, what you say is just as important as how you say it. The tactics you use in a conversation can mean the difference between a positive outcome for your buddy and a negative outcome, so it’s critical to study up on effective tactics.

Before we get into the specific tactics, there are a few general things to keep in mind when approaching a buddy:

- Your primary goals are to gather information and get your buddy talking. This means that for much of the conversation, you will be asking questions or paraphrasing what your buddy is saying (each of these tactics is described below).
- Your goal is NOT to “fix” your buddy or dispense advice to “set them straight.” If you start from the premise that your buddy is wrong, incompetent, or “broken,” that will come across in the conversation, and you will be met with resistance or even hostility.
- Once you better understand your buddy’s situation and you’ve built rapport in the conversation, only then is it effective to offer some advice or suggest some resources that might help. Giving advice right off the bat tends to shut conversations down, and one-sided conversations are usually ineffective.
- Often, your buddies will feel more motivated to try solutions that they come up with themselves. You should assume your buddies have a good idea of what will work for them; a good strategy is to only suggest solutions after asking buddies to come up with a few possible solutions.
- If at any point you learn that your buddy is in immediate danger or considering self-harm or suicide, don’t try to handle the situation yourself—call in backup. Call a hotline, such as 1-800-273-TALK (and press 1), or dial 911.

The following is a non-comprehensive list of effective tactics you can use in a conversation. You can see these tactics in action throughout the Chris, Alicia, and Hector conversations.

### MAKING OBSERVATIONS vs. STATING OPINIONS

When you’re concerned about a buddy, a good way to start the conversation is to make a factual observation. That means describing an observable fact without adding any opinion, exaggeration, or judgment. For maximum effect, follow it with an open-ended question (see below for more information on open-ended questions). Here are some good examples of making an observation:

- ✓ “The last few times we grabbed lunch, I noticed you ordered a diet soda, but nothing to eat. What’s up?”
- ✓ “Last week when you were studying for that test, I noticed you snapped at your friends a bit. I was just wondering what happened.”

Since you’re just stating the facts of what you observed, there’s little chance of your buddy getting defensive and sidetracking the conversation with an argument.
On the other hand, a surefire way to make your buddy defensive is to, instead, state an opinion. Here's what the above two examples would look like if they were framed as opinions:

- “You’ve been starving yourself this week. What’s going on?”
- “When you were studying for that test, you were being a jerk to your friends. Why?”

Notice that these statements are probably exaggerations, and they include judgments about the buddy. It would be easy for a buddy to get defensive and try to argue the point; a likely response could be, “I haven’t been starving myself, I’m just trying to cut back,” or, “I wasn’t being a jerk, I just asked people to go somewhere else so I could study. There’s nothing wrong with that.” Starting off by making your buddy defensive leaves you on shaky ground for the rest of the conversation. Instead, build a strong foundation for the rest of the conversation by starting with a factual observation.

### OPEN-ENDED QUESTIONS

Since your primary goals are to gather information and get your buddy talking, asking questions should be one of your go-to tactics. Not only are they great for opening up the conversation and eliciting more information, but they’re also useful for keeping the conversation moving forward. If at any point you’re not sure what to say, asking a question can keep things moving. (Paraphrasing, described below, is also a good tool for accomplishing this.)

But you don’t want to use just any question; you want to use open-ended questions. These are questions that require more than just a one-word answer, and they often begin with the words “what,” “how,” or “why.”

For example, if you ask, “You’re taking a lot of classes this semester. What has that been like?” the response will likely be at least a couple sentences. It will open up the conversation and keep things moving. But if you asked, “You’re taking a lot of classes. Is it going okay?” you’re setting your buddy up to give a one-word answer. If your buddy just says, “Yeah,” you haven’t made any progress.

Here are some more examples of this kind of closed-ended question:

- “Are you okay?”
- “Are you really busy this semester?”
- “Do you like your professors?”
- “Did you get bored with your major?”

And here are examples of how you could rephrase those as open-ended questions:

- “How are you doing?” or “How have you been lately?”
- “What’s your schedule like this semester?”
- “What do you think about your professors?”
- “Why did you change your major?”
Follow-Up Questions

Sometimes, even an open-ended question can get a short answer. For example, consider this exchange:

YOU: What's your schedule like this semester?
BUDDY: Busy.

That's okay, because you can ask a follow-up question to get more information:

YOU: What's your schedule like this semester?
BUDDY: Busy.
YOU: Okay… what's keeping you busy?
BUDDY: Oh, you know… I'm taking an extra class, and I'm getting into student government, and then there's the track team….

You can keep using follow-up questions as necessary to gather more information. For maximum effectiveness, make sure your follow-up questions are open-ended!

PARAPHRASING

Paraphrasing—or repeating back what your buddy has said in different words—not only shows that you're listening closely and that you care about what your buddy is saying, but it also gives your buddy a chance to clarify what he or she said. This clarification can be useful for helping you understand your buddy's situation and for helping your buddy think about what he or she really means.

For example, take this exchange from Nate's conversation with Alicia:

NATE: When's the last time you and your husband went out together?
ALICIA: Sometime last year. I always have so much crap on my list… and going out to a movie or whatever can wait, y'know? And anyway, that's how it was on deployments. I'd be away for a long time and then I'd be with him for a while.

NATE: So… spending time with Terry seems less important right now than studying for classes or doing paperwork.
ALICIA: No, it's not less important…. It's just that we have the rest of our lives to go on dates and hold hands and all that crap. But school has to happen now. We know we have to make sacrifices now so I can get a better job… we're dealing with it.
When Nate paraphrased what she said in his own words, it got her thinking about what she really meant. When she clarified what she meant, it kept the conversation moving forward.

Just like making observations (described above), when paraphrasing, it’s important to keep a neutral tone and avoid adding any judgment. Nate’s conversation with Alicia also has an example of a bad paraphrase that sounds judgmental:

**NATE:** So you don’t care about your husband.

**ALICIA:** What! I didn’t say that!

**NATE:** Okay, but you don’t have time for him.

**ALICIA:** That doesn’t mean I don’t care about him. So get off my case.

Rather than being productive and keeping the conversation moving forward, this paraphrase made Alicia defensive and shut down the conversation.

**SYMPATHY vs. VALIDATION**

Sympathy and validation are two different ways of taking your buddy’s side. Sympathizing means saying you’re sorry for someone or offering pity. Here are some examples of sympathizing:

- “That sucks.”
- “I feel for you.”
- “Wow, sorry to hear it.”

This kind of statement does show that you feel bad for your buddy, but it doesn’t move the conversation forward because you’re not doing anything more than reinforcing your buddy’s negative attitudes. If you really want to make your buddy feel better and focus the conversation on problem-solving, validation is a much more effective tactic to use.

Validation is a way to show that you understand your buddy’s concerns and recognize them as valid. It’s a way of taking your buddy’s side. Some examples of validating statements are:

- “This isn’t an easy transition to make… it makes sense that you’re stressed.”
- “Taking three extra classes isn’t easy—anyone would have trouble with that.”
- “I used to struggle with the same thing, and it was tough” or “I struggle with that, too.”

Notice that, where sympathy was all about how you feel (specifically, how you feel sorry for your buddy), validation is all about your buddy and normalizing what he or she is going through. Even in the last example, you are talking about a shared experience rather than just something you feel.
As an example, consider Chris’ concern in his conversation with Nate:

**CHRIS:** I’ll read the same paragraph six times, and I’ll think I’m good to go, and then I’ll come back to it five minutes later and… it’s like I’ve never seen it before.

How should Nate respond to that? If he used sympathy, his response might look like this:

**NATE:** That sucks. Maybe you should talk to someone about that.

This response sounds like a brush-off; it sounds like Nate doesn’t want to talk about Chris’ problems, and maybe Nate doesn’t even care about them. But if he used validation instead of sympathy, his response might look like this:

**NATE:** I can see why it’s been really hard to do well in calc if nothing from the textbook stays in your head… I mean, have you thought about talking to someone about that?

In this response, Nate is agreeing that Chris’ concerns are valid. He is taking Chris’ side and showing he’s interested in the situation. This paves the way for Nate to make a suggestion (“Have you thought about talking to someone about that?”). Ultimately, validating Chris’ concerns keeps the conversation positive and moving forward, where just sympathizing shuts the conversation down.

Another difference between sympathy and validation is that sympathy can reinforce a feeling of hopelessness or victimization, while validation is often empowering. Acknowledging a problem is the first step toward finding a solution—once Chris is feeling that Nate understands his concerns and is firmly on his side, they can work together to problem-solve.

**AGREEING, DISAGREEING, and AGREEING WITH A TWIST**

One of the hardest situations to handle is when a buddy’s own beliefs or attitudes are causing problems. For example, consider the following statement Chris makes in his conversation with Nate:

**CHRIS:** The kids here drive me insane.

This is a belief that could be causing a lot of anger in his life; it could be a self-fulfilling prophecy. When deciding how to respond to this kind of statement, consider what will do your buddy the most good in the long run. If you agree with him, that might look like this:
That response encourages him to be angry at the other students, which probably isn’t helpful to him in the long run. On the other hand, if you outright disagree with him, you might provoke resistance:

This response makes Chris defensive and makes him argue even more strongly for his position. It shuts down the conversation. In the long run, that won’t help him much, either. But there’s a middle ground between agreeing and disagreeing called agreeing with a twist. You start by agreeing with your buddy (this can also be validating statement, as described above), and then offer a twist on what he or she said. This might look like:

This approach combines the best of both worlds: it avoids an argument, and it still manages to challenge Chris’ unhelpful attitude and keep the conversation going. The virtue of agreeing with a twist is that you’re working with your buddy and not against your buddy.

MAKING A REFERRAL

No one is entirely self-sufficient; all of us need help at some point. That’s why it’s important to have buddies who will watch your back, and why it’s important to be a good buddy for other people. But sometimes a buddy’s challenge may fall outside your area of expertise. In this case, the best thing to do is make a referral to another resource that can help. For example, if your buddy is having health problems, it’s probably time to suggest healthcare options.
There are effective and ineffective ways to make a referral. Some ineffective tactics to avoid are:

- **Jump straight to the referral without fully understanding the situation or building rapport.** For example, if your buddy mentions she's been feeling anxious and you immediately tell her to see a therapist, she's likely to get defensive.
- **Pressure your buddy to go.** Unless your buddy is in immediate danger, it's best to keep things low-pressure to avoid provoking resistance.
- **Exaggerate the positive or minimize the negative.** If the resource you're referring to is worthwhile, you don't need to lie about it. Your buddy deserves to make an informed decision based on the facts.
- **Focus on the negative or tell “horror stories.”**

And some effective tactics to use when making a referral are:

- **Give a personal recommendation, if possible.**
- **Offer to go with your buddy.** This can be reassuring, and it also makes it more likely your buddy will follow through with the referral.
- **Explain exactly how the resource can help.**
- **Normalize the process of getting help for your buddy.** Sometimes people's beliefs or attitudes can stop them from seeking help; for example, some people feel that seeking help is an admission of weakness, or they feel like they are the only person dealing with their particular problem. If this seems to be the case, helping buddies work through these feelings can make it much more likely that they'll follow through with the referral.
- **Focus on the positive consequences of overcoming your buddy's challenge.**
- **Offer multiple options and let your buddy decide what sounds best.**
- **Keep the conversation low-pressure.** Your buddy is much more likely to follow through with the referral and keep seeking help if it is done entirely voluntarily. For example, emphasize that your buddy can meet with an expert once to try it out, and doesn't have to go back if it isn't helpful.