

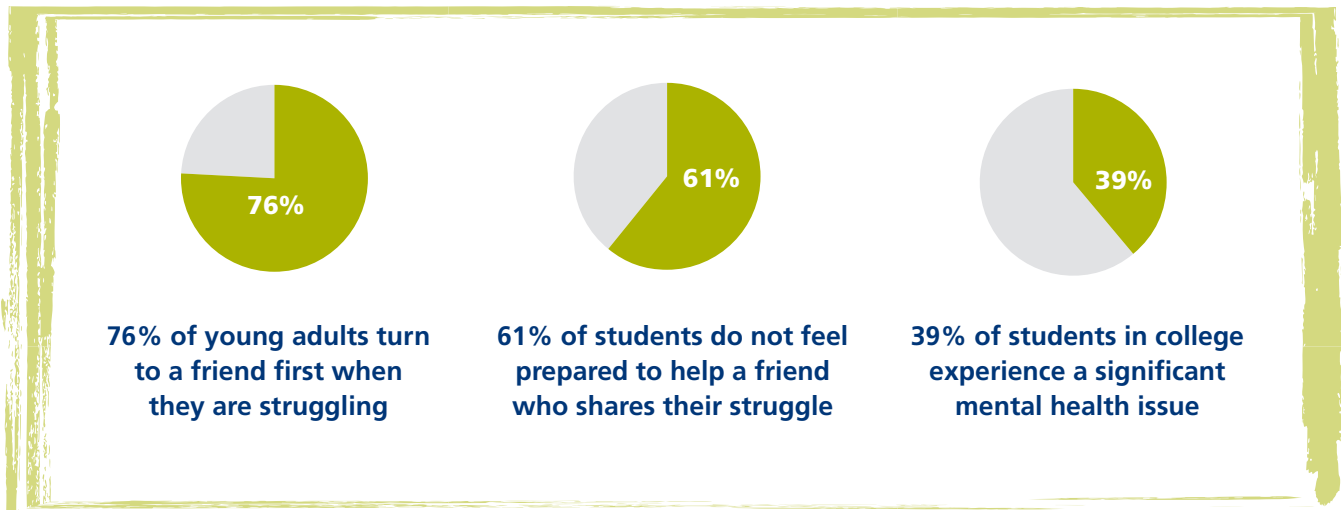


KNOW YOUR V-A-R[®]

Three steps to show up for the people
around us, one conversation at a time



WHAT TO SAY WHEN YOU'RE JUST NOT SURE



Mental health struggles are on the rise globally, particularly among young adults. Suicide remains the second leading cause of death for young adults - including those on college campuses nationwide.

You can help.

THREE SIMPLE STEPS

Using this toolkit, you can show up for yourself and others in a meaningful way that is also fun and simple. Together, we can change the culture around mental health in communities across the nation, making sure every person hears the important message: *"It's okay to not be okay,"* and ensuring mental health is prioritized as highly as physical health.

Use this toolkit to:

- Learn how to show up for friends who may be struggling by using Active Minds' everyday tool for everyday conversations, the V-A-R® (Validate-Appreciate-Refer) technique.
- Engage your friends and community in meaningful activities that support self-care and mental wellness.
- Access culture-changing resources, tools, and sample conversations.

HOW TO BEST SHOW UP FOR OUR FRIENDS

A conversation can be life-changing. For many, they just need to feel supported. It can be challenging, though, to know exactly what to say when someone tells you they are stressed, having a difficult day, or are struggling with their mental health.

V-A-R[®], or Validate-Appreciate-Refer, empowers people to know what to say and do in those moments.

The three steps are a helpful guide to listening and responding in a meaningful way. You can also let other people know about V-A-R so that their conversations are likewise rooted in active listening skills and validation. Validation can make all the difference in the world.



VALIDATE



APPRECIATE



REFER

LEARN MORE ABOUT THE THREE STEPS BELOW:

VALIDATE their feelings.

Let them know that what they're feeling is okay and that you believe them. When someone reaches out to you, validate their feelings and acknowledge that whatever they are going through is okay. Even if you cannot relate with what they are going through, it's real to them.

VALIDATION SOUNDS LIKE...

- "That makes sense."
- "That sounds difficult."
- "You have a lot on your plate."
- "I believe you."
- "I hear you."

APPRECIATE their courage.

Speaking up can be a challenging step — let them know it's a good one. You can use this opportunity to let them know you care and they're not alone.

APPRECIATE SOUNDS LIKE...

- "Thank you for sharing."
- "Thank you for being open with me."
- "I'm here for you if you want to talk or need anything."
- "You are not alone."
- "It helps to know what you're going through."

REFER them to skills and support.

Let them know that help is available and refer them to appropriate resources. Sometimes what a person needs is a listening ear and social connection. Sometimes they will need more. You can help them to figure out what will work best for them in this moment. Notice that "Refer" is best when posed as a question.

REFER SOUNDS LIKE...

- "What makes you feel truly cared for?"
- "What's one thing that would make a big difference for you right now, in this moment?"
- "Do you think it might be helpful to talk to someone? I can go with you."
- "Do you want to make plans to go on a run together tomorrow?"

REFER - TAKING IT A STEP FURTHER

If their need for support is greater than what self-care or coping strategies can take care of, suggest your campus counseling center or other mental health professional and ask how that feels to them. Offer to stay with them while they call or go with them to their appointment — this reinforces the fact you're there to support them and they're not alone.

If your friend is in crisis, stay with them until they are able to connect with immediate help:
activeminds.org/gethelp.

Remember that this conversation may be ongoing. Following up with the person the next day, or soon, is always a good idea. Notice that all of the "Refer" suggestions are in the form of a question:
it's important to use this step to learn from the person sharing their struggle what is most helpful for them.

YOU MIGHT BE WONDERING...

Are there things I shouldn't say or do when someone opens up to me?

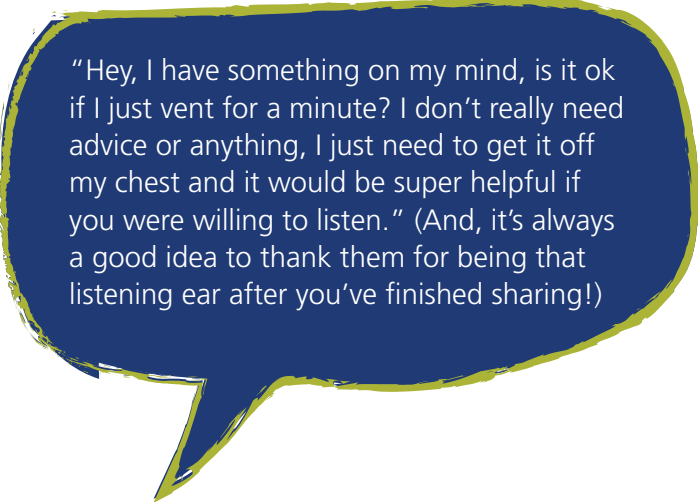
Yes! Be careful not to minimize or judge what they are going through. Try not to fix or solve their challenge without fully hearing them out and validating their feelings. Use caution when trying to relate what they are going through - you may not know the full context.

I'm worried I'm going to say the wrong thing. What can I do to make sure I don't? And, what if I'm not qualified to support someone who is struggling?

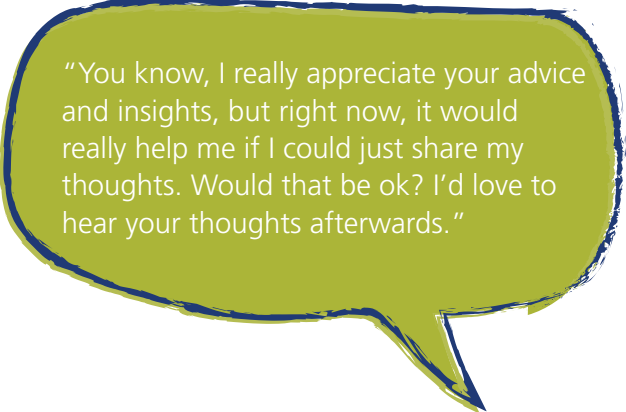
Totally valid. It can be intimidating to step into the arena of showing up for people in this way. V-A-R is all about just being there for the people around us and helping them to understand that they are not alone. It's not about being an expert and a lot of times, a friendly, nonjudgmental person is exactly what will help someone through a challenging moment. It's less about what you say than it is about being present and showing that you care.

How can I ask someone to use V-A-R with me when I need to share something that I'm going through and want to be heard and validated?

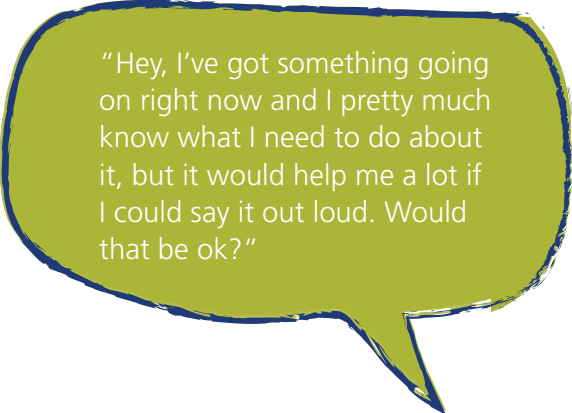
Great question. You deserve to be heard and validated, too. Here are a few ways that you can ask for what you need around communication.



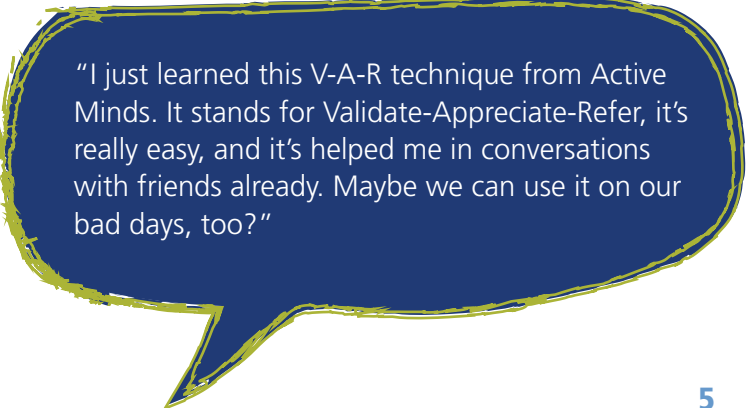
"Hey, I have something on my mind, is it ok if I just vent for a minute? I don't really need advice or anything, I just need to get it off my chest and it would be super helpful if you were willing to listen." (And, it's always a good idea to thank them for being that listening ear after you've finished sharing!)



"You know, I really appreciate your advice and insights, but right now, it would really help me if I could just share my thoughts. Would that be ok? I'd love to hear your thoughts afterwards."



"Hey, I've got something going on right now and I pretty much know what I need to do about it, but it would help me a lot if I could say it out loud. Would that be ok?"



"I just learned this V-A-R technique from Active Minds. It stands for Validate-Appreciate-Refer, it's really easy, and it's helped me in conversations with friends already. Maybe we can use it on our bad days, too?"

What if someone expresses that they are really struggling, or that they are considering hurting themselves?

If you are concerned that you or someone you know is in danger of hurting themselves or others, it's important to help them find the support that they need. Visit activeminds.org/gethelp for immediate crisis support resources.

DO'S ✓

- Use caution when relating to their experience - you may not know the full context.
- Ask for what you need in a conversation.
- Seek help if you are concerned that you or someone you know is in danger of hurting themselves or others.

DON'TS ✗

- Minimize or judge what they're going through.
- Try to fix or solve their challenge.
- Try to be an expert - it's enough to be present and show you care.

Need more support with a particularly difficult conversation?

Head to activeminds.org/var.

BRING V-A-R® TO YOUR CAMPUS, SCHOOL, OR COMMUNITY

V-A-R is designed to be easy to use and easy to remember. Because it is short and catchy, there are lots of options for raising awareness of this tool with the goal of changing the way you and your communities talk with one another and about mental health.

- **Learn the V-A-R steps:** Validate their feelings. Appreciate their courage. Refer them to skills and support (see page 8).
- **Let others know about V-A-R** through an in-person or virtual event, social media posting, and general word-of-mouth (see five ideas on pages 8-12).
- **Model use of V-A-R** through your own communication. Starting with validation is the key to more thoughtful, inclusive, and supportive communication.

We invite you to think creatively about how you can spread the word about V-A-R among your peers, and in this toolkit you'll find a few suggestions to inspire your thinking and for you to put to use as you see fit!



indicates that the event can be virtual or in-person.



**YOU DON'T NEED TO BE
AN EXPERT TO HELP.
YOU JUST NEED TO BE THERE.**

#1 PEER-FACILITATED V-A-R® TRAINING AND DISCUSSION



Active Minds offers [easy-to-use](#) tools to help train your peers on the V-A-R conversation model, including simple resources to create your own group discussion on V-A-R.

In addition, you can purchase a structured V-A-R training complete with a recording of the full training by one of Active Minds' professional speakers, Becky Fein. It comes with a group discussion guide and you can add on an optional tabling kit with hand-outs and resources that will help you feel confident in using V-A-R in daily conversations and sharing it with others.

These tools can be used to bring V-A-R to many student groups:

- **Residential halls** - plan this with RAs
- **Sports teams** - plan this with coaches or team captains
- **Clubs, fraternities, or sororities** - offer to be a special guest at an upcoming meeting
- **Classes** - see if a professor is willing to commit as little as five minutes to this discussion

PURCHASE V-A-R® TRAINING

What groups do you think would be interested in learning the V-A-R conversation guide?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____



#2 A VALIDATION EXCHANGE

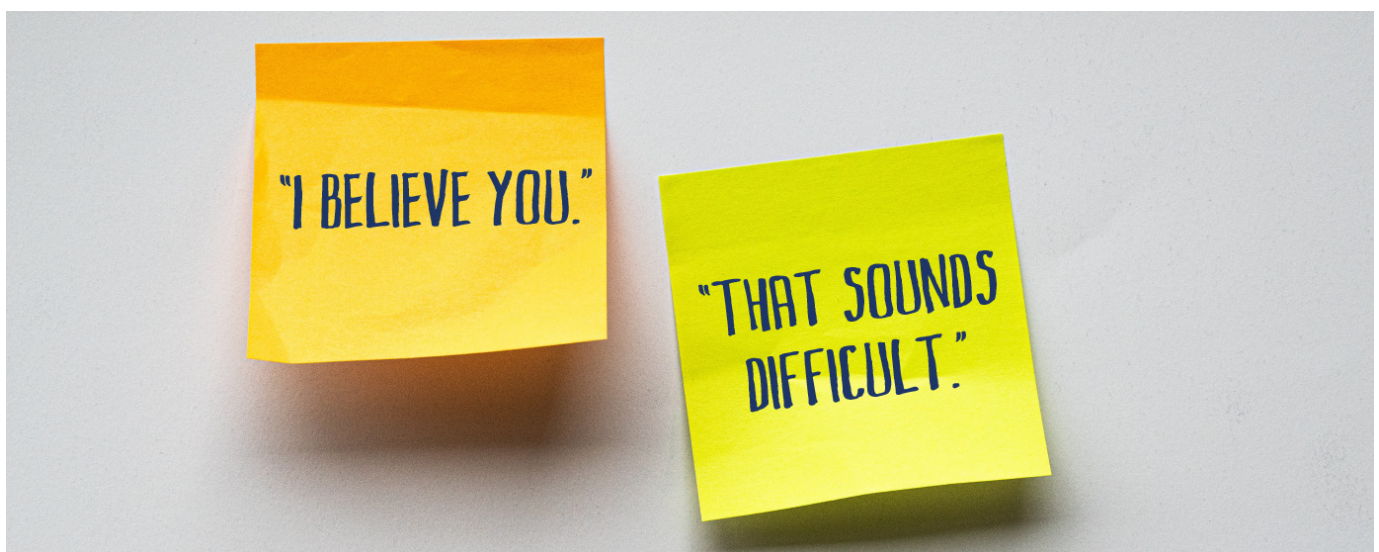


Engage your community in an exploration about what it feels like to be validated when you are going through something. Some engaging ideas include:

- **A virtual or physical sticky note word cloud** that answers the question: “Thinking about a time you were going through something, how did it feel to be validated?”
 - Tip: Post some messages to help people understand validation, and respond with how it felt. “That sounds difficult.” “I believe you.” “That makes sense.”
- **A social media sharing campaign** using polls, pictures, or posts that include the hashtag **#YouAreNotAlone** to spread awareness and solidarity about the importance of validation. You can launch the campaign with a prompt like...
 - “Share a time that someone validated something you were going through.”
 - “Why is it important to first validate someone’s experiences when they open up to you?”
 - “Tag someone who you know is there for you to listen and validate your experiences when you need to open up.”

What other ideas do you have to spread a wider understanding of validation on your campus, and support its use in conversations?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____



#3 GO FOR A WALK OR RUN



Organize a walk or run with a few friends, individually or as a small group. If it's not an option to be together in person, talk on the phone while you both walk. Use these V-A-R-friendly questions to check-in with each other while you walk or run:

- "How are you coping with all of this?"
- "What's on your mind?"
- "What would help to make this day better?"
- "What's going on with [thing we talked about previously]?" Recall and ask about the little things they've shared with you in the past such as plans they have or something they were excited about in your last conversation.
- "Have you been able to keep up with [hobby/interest]?" Ask about something they care about (i.e. dating, side projects, hobbies, family members).

What days or times can you set up a walk with a friend?

DAY: _____ TIME: _____

DAY: _____ TIME: _____

DAY: _____ TIME: _____

#4 CHALK IT OUT

Chalk validating messages on campus! Let people walking by know that they are not alone, that it's ok to not be ok, and that whatever they are experiencing is valid - using colorful chalk!

(*Be sure to obtain permission if needed before chalking on campus.)

Here are some ideas:

- "It's OK to not be ok."
- "Whatever you are going through is valid."
- "'I believe you' - 3 vital and validating words"
- "Your feelings are valid."
- "You are never alone."
- "The world needs you here."
- "Be there for a friend. Validate-Appreciate-Refer."
- "You have permission to be human."



Another option is to hang V-A-R posters around campus so that people can see the full V-A-R message.

- [Download ready-to-print posters here.](#)

Where on campus will most people see your messages? What validating messages should they hear?

Location 1: _____

Location 2: _____

Location 3: _____

Message 1: _____

Message 2: _____

Message 3: _____

#5 HOST A PANEL DISCUSSION



Recruit a few people (three or more, ideally) for a panel discussion about personal experiences with mental health struggles and the people who showed up for them in their moment of need. Active Minds recommends discussing mental health personal experiences with respect and relative safety, using the following 'aims' and 'avoids' tips.

AIM TO:

- Share stories about hope, resilience, and helpful people and actions.
"It was incredible when..."
"Something that really helped was..."
- Support the audience in understanding why validation is so important, even when hearing about mental health struggles that we may or may not relate with.
- Provide solution-oriented context for your audience.
- Focus on your "main message," i.e. what do you want your audience to walk away understanding about your experience of being seen and heard, and how it can be embraced to expand their idea of mental health and how to support their loved ones?
- Spend a substantial amount of the session on tips and helpful actions that relate to V-A-R.

AVOID:

- Stigmatizing mental health experiences.
- Assumptions or generalizations about other people's experiences. Call in (vs. call-out) panelists or audience members who do this, too, and help frame experiences as individualized and personal.
- Glorifying negative coping behaviors, such as self-injury or substance abuse.

Consider incorporating the [V-A-R discussion guide and video](#) into your session. A panel discussion can also be in-person or virtual. You may want to consider engaging someone to be a moderator who can help facilitate the panel in taking turns and the audience in asking questions.

What panelists could you recruit? What groups would you invite to the discussion? What groups could you partner with to achieve the highest attendance?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____

MORE HELPFUL RESOURCES FROM ACTIVE MINDS



Up your self-care game:
activeminds.org/selfcare



**Bring your mental health
advocacy to your workplace:**
activeminds.org/atwork



**Learn more
about offering help:**
activeminds.org/bethere



**Resources for
offering help:**
activeminds.org/resources



**Where to go if you
need immediate help:**
activeminds.org/gethelp

CONNECT WITH ACTIVE MINDS



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SHARE V-A-R® WITH YOUR COMMUNITIES

No matter how involved with mental health advocacy someone is, V-A-R has the power to be an “ah ha!” moment that transforms a conversation from intimidating into approachable and accessible to all who are willing to engage.

Remember: the key of V-A-R is that you don’t have to be an expert to help. It’s about being there.

Visit activeminds.org/var for more information.

ABOUT ACTIVE MINDS

Active Minds is the nation’s leading nonprofit organization supporting mental health awareness and education for young adults. Active Minds has a presence on over 800 college, university, and high school campuses nationwide, and is powered by a robust **Chapter Network**, the nationally acclaimed **Send Silence Packing®** exhibit, and inspiring **Active Minds Speakers**. The organization is dedicated to ending the silence and changing the conversation about mental health for everyone. To learn more, visit activeminds.org.

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