How to Talk About Mental Health

Do you need help starting a conversation with your child about mental health? Try leading with these questions. Make sure you actively listen to your child's response.

* Can you tell me more about what is happening? How you are feeling?
* Have you had feelings like this in the past?
* Sometimes you need to talk to an adult about your feelings. I'm here to listen. How can I help you feel better?
* Do you feel like you want to talk to someone else about your problem?
* I'm worried about your safety. Can you tell me if you have thoughts about harming yourself or others?

When talking about mental health problems with your child you should:

* Communicate in a straightforward manner
* Speak at a level that is appropriate to a child or adolescent's age and development level (preschool children need fewer details than teenagers)
* Discuss the topic when your child feels safe and comfortable
* Watch for reactions during the discussion and slow down or back up if your child becomes confused or looks upset
* Listen openly and let your child tell you about his or her feelings and worries

### Tips for getting started

Let your young person know you’re concerned and want to help. Create an environment where they can open up, and make sure you give them space to talk. You could try saying:

* “I’m really worried about you. Can we talk?”
* “I’ve been noticing that you are (sad/distant/not yourself). I am really concerned. Can we talk about what’s been bothering you?"
* “You haven’t been acting like yourself lately. Let’s talk about what’s going on.”

**When a young person shares their feelings...**

* be an attentive listener – sit in a relaxed position and use appropriate eye contact
* ask open ended questions to try and get them talking rather than asking questions with yes/no answers that won’t really tell you how they’re feeling or what they’re thinking
* acknowledge their feelings – try not to minimise or down-play how a young person may be feeling
* don’t jump in immediately and give advice – be calm and let them do the talking. Ask questions, but try not to bombard them!
* try to keep your reactions in check – if your young person gets a judgmental, critical, shocked or angry response from you, they’ll be much less likely to come to you with issues in the future
* remind your young person that they’re not alone – let them know that you’re there to support and help in any and every way that you can
* if you’re not sure what to say, it can help to do a little research - read up on anxiety, depression and suicide. The more you know, the better equipped you will be to help. Don’t suggest that they just “cheer up” or “pull themselves together”
* if they don’t feel like talking, try writing a note or sending a supportive message via text or Facebook
* help your young person improve their confidence by acknowledging and building on the things they do well
* be respectful of their privacy – make sure your young person is comfortable with you telling others about their experiences, whether they are family, friends or teachers etc.
* Talk with them about what information can be shared and what they would prefer to remain private.

### Providing reassurance

If your young person is experiencing anxiety or depression, it will probably affect the way they think about things. They’re more likely to approach situations negatively, believing nothing much can change or that things are hopeless. Being anxious and worried can also get in the way of finding solutions. If the young person feels this way, they may need:

* encouragement to explore options for what they can do next
* reassurance that things will be OK
* to focus on small steps and achievements.

### Seeking support

Let your young person know that support and treatment is available, and that you can work through the options together. Getting them to talk to a GP about what’s going on is a good first step. You could offer to make an appointment and go along if they want.

Become part of your young person’s ongoing support system. Check in with them frequently to see how they’re doing and to remind them that you care.

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