

Talking to Adolescents & Teens about Mental Health

The first step in starting a conversation about mental health is to choose a good time. It's really important to make space to be together without an agenda or pressure. Conversation tends to flow best when it naturally occurs. Consider bringing up the topic of mental health when doing chores, cooking, hanging out, or in the car. Be aware of changes in your child's willingness to engage with you. If they are busy, or having a bad day you may want to wait until they are less preoccupied.

Conversation Starters

Observations. In a non-judgmental way let your child/teen know that you've noticed:

- They don't seem to be hanging out or talking to their friends as much as usual
- That their school work seems to be suffering. This may be indicated by slipping grades, assignments going undone, or a general lack of interest in anything school related. Offer extra help if it's simply trouble with the subject matter.
- Their mood seems to have "darkened." For instance, they may be talking about death or dying, giving away belongings, or posting pictures (or other signs of interest) in dead celebrities or other morbid topics.

Screening results. If you took the parent screen at mhascreening.org and the results indicated your child/teen may be showing signs of an emotional, behavioral or cognitive disorder print out the results and share them. You can also ask your child/teen to take the youth screen at mhascreening.org.

Information. Do some research online on health organization or government websites and print any pertinent information you want to bring up during your conversation.

Experience. Maybe you have a mental health disorder yourself and recognize some of the symptoms you've struggled with in your child/teen. Perhaps you have a friend or family member who has struggled and notice similarities in your child/teen. Be sure to keep the tone of the conversation hopeful and remind your child/teen that these disorders are common and treatable.

What if a child or teen talks to you?

DO...

- **Listen.** Really listening means stopping the voice in your own head and try to actively pay attention to person who is speaking. This is hard for everyone, but practice helps!
- **Ask if they've thought about what they might need to get better.** If they haven't, offer to support to listen and talk it out with them. If they have, support them in following through with their needs.
- **Learn.** If they bring you information, read it. Learn as much as possible about your child's condition and the realities of mental health disorders.
- Make sure to **keep things confidential, unless it is life threatening.**
- **Normalize.** Assure your child that having a mental health issue is common, and does not mean that they can't get better.



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- **Acknowledge your fear, but don't let it rule your behaviors.** As a parent it is important that we confront stigma or discrimination directly.
- **Offer an impartial counselor,** and assure your child that information will be confidential
- **Prepare to be an advocate.** Finding the right mental health treatment is like finding the right medical provider. It takes time and effort to make sure you're getting the best care you need.

DON'T...

- **Minimize** how they are feeling or tell them “you shouldn't think that way.” It's quite difficult to bring up this conversation, remember that they probably worried over it for some time before coming to you.
- **Let your emotions rule your response** – especially if you're angry. Negative words (“You're never gonna get it together, are you?”) can set someone back for a long time and adds to stress and problems. It's also not uncommon for parents to feel guilt and blame themselves. If your child has a brain based illness, it is not your fault, but you can be part of the solution.
- **Use the word “crazy”.**
- **Tell your child what they SHOULD do;** instead, ask what they want you to help them with.
- **Argue** if you encounter resistance from your child. Go back to listening, asking open ended questions and just repeating what they've said.
- **Make excuses or blame others.** “This is the school's fault, they should have given you more individual attention”
- **Compare your child to their siblings.** “Your brother doesn't have these problems. Why can't you be more like him?”

What if it's not your child?

Ask if the young person has told their parents yet. If not, delicately try to figure out why. You may hear reasons like, “My parents have too much going on” or “They won't believe me.” Offer to help the young person start a conversation with their parents if they would like. Explain that you can provide advice and information, but only a parent or guardian can get them certain kinds of help, like a visit with a doctor or mental health professional.

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