

Time to Talk: Tips for Talking About Mental Health

Start a conversation about mental health when there is an open window of time to have an in-depth discussion, and neither you nor the person you're talking to will have to cut the conversation short. If you aren't sure how to bring up the topic of your mental health, here are a few ways to get started:

- **Start with a text if a face-to-face talk is too intimidating.** It could be a text message with a note that says, "I have some important things on my mind and need to make time to talk to you about them."
- **Find and share info.** Find important information online that might help you explain what you're going through. Print it and bring it with you when you're ready to talk.
- **Take the Youth Screen at mhascreening.org.** Print your results to share with the person you plan to talk to.

Still Stumped About How To Get Started? Use the text below and fill in the blanks. Pick from the options we've listed or use your own words.

For the past (day/week/month/year/_____), I have been feeling (unlike myself/sad/angry/anxious/moody/agitated/lonely/hopeless/fearful/overwhelmed/ distracted/confused/stressed/empty/restless/unable to function or get out of bed/_____).

I have struggled with (changes in appetite /loss of interest in things I used to enjoy/ hearing or seeing things that were not there / feeling unsure if things are real or not real/lack of energy/increased energy/ inability to concentrate/alcohol or drug use or abuse/self-harm /overwhelming focus on weight or appearance/feeling worthless/ uncontrollable thoughts/guilt/paranoia/nightmares/ bullying/not sleeping enough/ sleeping too much/risky sexual behavior/overwhelming sadness/losing friends /unexplained anger/isolation/ feeling detached from my body/feeling out of control/self harm /cutting/thoughts of suicide/plans of suicide/abuse/sexual assault/death of a loved one/_____).

Telling you this makes me feel (nervous/anxious/hopeful/embarrassed/ empowered/mature/self-conscious/ guilty/_____), but I'm telling you this because (I'm worried about myself/it is impacting my schoolwork/it is impacting my friendships/I am afraid/I don't want to feel like this/I don't know what to do/I don't have anyone else to talk to about this/I trust you/_____).

I would like to (talk to a doctor or therapist/talk to a guidance counselor/talk to my teachers/talk about this later/create a plan to get better/talk about this more/find a support group/_____) and I need your help.

What if someone talks to you about their mental health?

- **Listen.** Let them finish their sentences and complete thoughts without interrupting.
- **Let them know if you understand.** If someone has just spilled their guts and you've gone through something similar—tell them. It helps for someone to know they aren't alone.
- **Avoid being judgmental.** Don't tell them they are being weird or crazy; it's not helpful at all.
- **Take them seriously.** Try not to respond with statements that minimize how they are feeling or what they are going through, such as, "You're just having a bad week," or "I'm sure it's nothing."



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- **Make yourself available to talk again if needed.** While it can be a big relief for someone to share something they have been keeping secret, mental health struggles usually aren't solved with one conversation. Let the person who has spoken with you know that they can reach out to you again.
- **Don't turn what you've been told into gossip.** If someone is talking to you about their mental health, it was probably tough for them to work up the nerve to say something in the first place and you shouldn't share what they tell you with others. Let them share on their own terms.
- **Tell an adult if you have to.** It's important to have friends that trust you, but if a friend indicates they have thoughts or plans of hurting themselves or another person, have been hearing voices or seeing things that no one else can hear or see, or have any other signs and symptoms that shouldn't be ignored then you need to tell an adult what is going on. That doesn't make you a bad friend; it just means that the problem requires more help than you can give. If someone you know is in crisis and needs help urgently, call 1-800-273-TALK (8255), text 741741, go to your local Emergency Room or call 911.

Now what? If you've made the decision to talk to someone about your mental health, you may be nervous about how things will go and what could happen. Check out the list below to find out more about what you can expect.

Things might be a little awkward at first for both people in the conversation. For a lot of people, talking about anything related to their health or body can be kind of tough at first.

You'll probably feel relieved. Being able to open up and share something you've been keeping to yourself for a long time can feel like a weight has been lifted. You might learn that the person you're talking to has had some personal experience or knows someone in their family who has gone through something similar, which will help you to feel less alone.

You may encounter someone who doesn't understand. While it's likely that a person will know someone who has struggled with their mental health, they may not understand what it's like- especially if they haven't struggled themselves.

Expect to be asked questions. Some questions might include: Did something difficult happen before you started feeling this way? Can you describe what it's like? Remember that the person you're talking to is probably asking questions to help them better understand what you're going through.

It's possible that you might not get the reaction you were hoping for. It can be discouraging if you work up the nerve to speak up and are then told, "get over it" or "you worry too much." Try to explain how it is really having an effect on your ability to live a healthy and happy life. If for some reason the person you chose to talk to still isn't "getting it" someone else will. Think about someone else you could talk to. Don't stop or go back to ignoring your situation or struggling alone.

Your next step might be going to an appointment of some sort. It may start with someone like the guidance counselor or school psychologist, a visit to your family doctor or psychiatrist or a therapist. These professionals can help figure out what exactly is going on and how to start getting you the help you need.

It takes time to get better. You could be going through something situational, which can improve with time to process feelings (for example, grief after the death of a loved one) or adjustments to your environment or you could have a more long term mental health issue. Mental health issues are common and treatable; however, you may have to try a few different things to find right type of treatment or combination of strategies that works best for you.

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