



How to Talk About Mental Health



Stigma surrounding mental health can all too often make talking about mental wellness difficult conversations to have. You might feel uncomfortable asking for help or checking in on how a friend or colleague is doing, unsure of what language to use or how to broach the topic.

At the end of the day what really matters is that you show that you're there to listen and support the other person. Similarly, if you're asking for help there's no "correct" way to do it — it's about reaching out and telling someone you trust that you need support.

Below are some healthy ways to talk about your mental well-being and suggestions for how to check in with others regarding their mental health.



Where to turn for support

If you feel like you need support for your mental health it can often be difficult to reach out, but you'll likely find that most people want to help and are honored you turned to them.

When deciding who to speak with, consider the people in your life who you trust to confide in and who have empathy and emotional intelligence. Is there a family member, a close friend, a teacher, a mentor, or someone else who you respect and feel comfortable opening up to?

If you'd prefer to set the stage before the conversation, mention to them that there's something you'd like to discuss and schedule in time to talk. Try to find a private space where you feel comfortable and can speak without being interrupted.

If a face-to-face conversation feels too intimidating, try reaching out to someone via text. The mode of communication shouldn't be a barrier to asking for help and connecting with someone you trust.



Suggestions for asking for help

Writing down notes ahead of time about what you want to say may help focus your thoughts. Don't feel like you need to express everything you're feeling over the course of one conversation. Talking about what you're going through is often a process that takes place over many discussions, and will be a little different with each person you speak with.

There's no need to be concerned if you don't know how to express yourself or what to say — keep it simple and tell the other person that you're feeling bad and don't know where to turn to and would like help. Say things as they are, don't make light of the situation or brush it off like it's not a big deal. Your mental health matters and someone who has your best interests in mind won't think you're a burden.

Consider what kind of support you want — do you need help finding a professional to speak with, would you like someone to accompany you to an appointment, or are you just looking for a listening ear? Let others know what they can do to help.

In some situations you may not get the response you were looking for. Mental health can be a difficult topic for some people to talk about — this may have to do with a lack of information, cultural aspects, someone's background, or something else altogether. The important thing is that you don't let this stop you from seeking help elsewhere.



You're in charge

You make the decisions on who you share details about your mental health with and what aspects you want to speak about. If you've found resources you like, consider sharing them with others to teach them about your condition.

Speaking with trusted friends and family about your mental health is a good place to start. Eventually, you will likely want to speak with a professional as they're trained to help you navigate challenges. It's important to build a strong support network that includes a mix of family and/or friends as well as professionals.

If you find yourself needing immediate help don't hesitate to reach out to someone you trust, visit an emergency room, or contact a crisis hotline.



Ways to reach out

If you're concerned about someone else's well-being and want to check in on them, it can be challenging to know how to begin the conversation. Even though it's tough to talk about, don't postpone the discussion hoping that the other person brings it up — mental health is important and the sooner that someone is able to get the help they need, the sooner they can begin their recovery.

Choose an appropriate time and place for the conversation, and maybe begin by asking them how they've been feeling lately. Try to keep your language "I" focused instead of "you" focused, for example, "I've noticed that your behavior has changed recently and it concerns me. Are you doing alright?" Don't get too caught up or worried about how you're phrasing things, communicating that you're there for them is the crucial part.

Try to maintain neutral, non-judgmental language and follow their lead in regards to the direction and pace of the conversation. You don't want them to feel like they're being interrogated — your job isn't to solve their problems, it's to listen and offer support where you're able to.



Show that you're there

You want to make the other person feel validated and understood. During the conversation, repeat back what they've said if you need to clarify anything. Don't try to dominate the situation or instruct them on what to do. Take cues from them about what the next steps are and ask what kind of support they need.

If you can relate to what they're saying feel free to empathize with them by bringing up your own experiences, but don't make the conversation about yourself. Keep the focus on them and their well-being. Don't dismiss their feelings with comments like "It's probably just a phase" or "It's not that big of a deal."

Use your judgement to determine the best plan of action going forward. Sometimes an individual can be a danger to themselves and needs professional help. If the person seems like they're in immediate danger, seek professional assistance or contact emergency services right away.



Tips for following up

Let the person you reached out to know that you're there to talk in the future as well, and that it wasn't just an isolated discussion. However, don't feel like every conversation you have with them needs to revolve around their mental health. Strive to be a positive influence in their life — invite them to join you for activities or social get-togethers.

Pay attention to your language and take care not to define a person by their diagnosis, for example instead of calling someone "bipolar" say that they are "a person with bipolar disorder." Never use derogatory terms and labels like "mental" or "insane."

Learning about the mental health challenges that someone is facing can be a supportive way to show that you're there for them. If you come across helpful resources, don't be afraid to pass them along to the person who's dealing with the condition.



Sources:

Child Mind Institute. How to Support a Friend With Mental Health Challenges.
childmind.org/article/support-friend-with-mental-health-challenges/

Opens in a new window

Child Mind Institute. How to Talk About Mental Health Issues.
childmind.org/article/talk-mental-health-issues/

Opens in a new window

Child Mind Institute. How to Talk to Your Parents About Getting Help.
childmind.org/article/how-to-talk-to-your-parents-about-getting-help-if-you-think-you-need-it/

Opens in a new window

Mental Health America. Time To Talk: Tips For Talking About Your Mental Health.
mhanational.org/time-talk-tips-talking-about-your-mental-health

Opens in a new window

Mental Health Foundation. How to support someone with a mental health problem.
mentalhealth.org.uk/publications/supporting-someone-mental-health-problem

Opens in a new window

National Alliance on Mental Illness. Disclosing to Others.
nami.org/Your-Journey/Individuals-with-Mental-Illness/Disclosing-to-Others

Opens in a new window

National Alliance on Mental Illness. How to Help a Friend.
nami.org/Your-Journey/Teens-Young-Adults/How-to-Help-a-Friend

Opens in a new window

National Alliance on Mental Illness. Supporting Recovery.
nami.org/Your-Journey/Family-Members-and-Caregivers/Supporting-Recovery

Opens in a new window

Optum. Myths and Facts About Mental Health.
livewell.optum.com/sec_BeWell/sub_bw_ConditionsbyName_Anxiety/cnt_art_15435_MythsandFactsAboutMentalHealth

Opens in a new window



Critical support when you need it

Visit optumeap.com/criticalsupportcenter for additional critical support resources and information.



This program should not be used for emergency or urgent care needs. In an emergency, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency room. This program is not a substitute for a doctor's or professional's care. Consult with your clinician for specific health care needs, treatment or medication. Due to the potential for a conflict of interest, legal consultation will not be provided on issues that may involve legal action against Optum or its affiliates, or any entity through which the caller is receiving these services directly or indirectly (e.g., employer or health plan). This program and its components may not be available in all states or for all group sizes and is subject to change. Coverage exclusions and limitations may apply.

Optum® is a registered trademark of Optum, Inc. in the U.S. and other jurisdictions. All other brand or product names are trademarks or registered marks or the property of their respective owners. Optum is an equal opportunity employer.

© 2023 Optum, Inc. All rights reserved. WF8463081 223388-092022 OHC