

May 11, 2023



Know! to start a conversation about mental health

What to do during conversations about mental health

Listen.

Listen with your full attention. Be patient with your young person as they put their thoughts and feelings into words. Try not to be too quick to give advice. Instead, let them confide in you.^{4,5}

Validate their feelings.

The stigma attached to mental health conditions can make young people feel ashamed of their mental health problems. Let them know it's okay to feel how they feel, and they are not the only people who feel this way.^{4,5,6}

Have conversations often.

Mental health struggles are often intermittent, so it's crucial to maintain an open dialogue. Young people may not always want to talk about their feelings but let them know you are willing to have those conversations whenever needed.^{5,6}

Discuss support and prevention.

Ask your young person what support they might need to get better and follow through with their ideas. In addition, teach them about coping strategies, self-care, and maintaining healthy habits.^{4,5,6}

May is Mental Health Awareness Month. During this month especially, it's important to recognize that conversations about mental health are for everyone, not just those diagnosed with mental illness. Everyone experiences mental health challenges, including young people. It may not be easy to tell when a young person in your life is struggling with mental health problems. That's why it's necessary to create an environment – at home, in schools, or wherever you interact with young people – where it's okay to talk about difficult emotions.

You have the power to support young people and help them develop the necessary skills to cope with challenging emotions. Even if you don't think the young people in your life are struggling with their mental health, take the time to start a conversation about mental health and build the trust that will empower young people to share their struggles with you.

Use the following guidelines to inform your conversations about mental health.

For preschool-age children

Keep it simple.

Limit the details you share about mental health by using basic words to describe emotions, like mad, sad, and happy. Teach simple coping mechanisms like breathing deeply or going to a quiet space to process emotions.¹

Help them understand.

Young children experience emotions before they can describe their emotions. Help them develop language to talk about their feelings by labeling the emotions you see in them, yourself, and others. You might try saying, "You have a big smile on your face. You must be happy to see your friend," or "Mom is sad because she misses your uncle."²

Share your emotions.

Start discussing your feelings and coping strategies early – young children will learn that it's okay to talk about emotions and ask for help. Share what happens when you feel sad or mad and how you deal with difficult emotions. Remember to keep it simple and avoid sharing too much information, as you don't want to overwhelm them.³

For elementary school-age children

Teach simple coping strategies.

Share different ways of managing intense emotions. For example, counting to 10 to calm down, clapping your hands when you're excited, hugging yourself when you're nervous, or squeezing a pillow really hard when you're mad.² For more coping strategies, check out this Know! tip.

Practice recognizing emotions.

When your young person is relaxed, practice recognizing and naming emotions. You might try talking about the feelings that characters in books, TV shows, or movies are experiencing. Or you may prefer talking about how different emotions feel in your body. For example, you could say, "When I'm angry, my hands get really tight and make fists. Does this happen to you when you feel angry?" When young people recognize their emotions, they will be better prepared to cope.²

Answer their questions.

Young people in this age group will likely be curious about mental health and have many questions. Answer their questions directly and honestly, using accurate terms to describe illnesses like depression and anxiety. If you don't have an answer to a question, tell them it is a good question and that you'll need to do some research before you answer. Be careful to avoid stigmatizing mental illness in your responses.^{1,3}

For pre-teens and teenagers

Keep the conversation open.

Teenagers respond well to open dialogues about mental health that don't feel like lectures or lessons. Maintain an open line of communication with your teen, encourage them to reach out for help, and be prepared to offer strategies and support when they reach out to you. Remind them that you will always be there to support them.^{1,3}

Prepare for specific questions.

Teenagers will likely have more specific and difficult questions about mental health. Do your research and be prepared to provide resources, dispel stereotypes, and correct misinformation. You can find more resources about mental health topics in the resources section below.¹

Focus on overwhelming emotions.

Pre-teens and teenagers often feel their emotions intensely and can become overwhelmed. As their brains are still developing, they may not have the skills to express and handle their emotions in an adult way. Try focusing on strategies to address overwhelming emotions, like naming and noticing the early signs of strong emotions building up and creating a list of healthy activities they could do when they notice these emotions.²

Note: If a young person is in crisis, seek immediate assistance. Call or text 988, the Suicide & CrisisLifeline, or text HOME to 741741 to access the Crisis Text Line.

Resources:

For those in crisis:

[988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline](#)
[Crisis Text Line](#)
[1-888-628-9454 Nacional de Prevención del Suicidio](#)
[The Trevor Project LGBTQ Lifeline](#)
[Trans Lifeline](#)
[BIPOC Resources](#)

For your conversations:

[SAMHSA – How to talk about mental health](#)
[NAMI – How to talk to your child about their mental health](#)
[MHA – Recognizing mental health problems in children](#)
[MHA – Talking to adolescents and teens: time to talk](#)
[Here To Help – Talking to your child or teen about anxiety](#)

[Superscript sources are hyperlinked at the start of this document](#)

For additional Know! Prevention Tips for Everyone, scan the QR code:

The Know! Tips newsletter is made possible through partnership with the Ohio Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services



What not to do during conversations about mental health

Don't minimize their feelings.

Remember that it's likely challenging for your young person to talk about their feelings. Avoid saying things like "You have nothing to worry about" or "You shouldn't think that way" – you may close the door for future conversations.⁴

Don't let your emotions take over.

Try not to let strong emotions like fear, anger, and guilt dictate your response. Hearing a negative response can increase a young person's stress and discourage them from sharing their feelings.⁴

Don't stigmatize mental illness.

Avoid perpetuating the stigma of mental illness and, instead, practice non-judgment. Avoid phrases like "Why can't you be normal?", "It's the school's fault you feel this way," and stigmatizing language like "crazy" or "insane."^{4,5}

Don't make assumptions.

Don't assume you know the driving forces behind a young person's anxiety or depression or the best way to solve their problems. Let them tell you what is affecting their mental health and what supports they would find helpful.⁷



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