

Talking to Teens about Mental Health

Talking to teenagers about... well, anything, can be tough sometimes. So, talking to them about mental health can be something that we naturally avoid. However, it's beneficial for teens to know that they can take charge of their wellbeing and speak up if they start to experience problems — especially with parents and guardians.

Even though it can sometimes seem like a difficult conversation to have, it's important to remember that you don't need to have all the answers. You just need to be open, curious, and compassionate.

PROMOTING GOOD TEENAGE MENTAL HEALTH

The first proverbial line of defence against poor mental health in a teenager is a loving and supportive environment within their household. This can not only reduce the chances of an adolescent suffering from mental health issues, but it can make them feel more confident talking about any problems that do arise.

Here are some tips to promote your teenager's mental health and wellbeing:

1. Show love, affection and care for your child.
2. Show that you're interested in what's happening in your child's life. Praise your child's efforts as well as their achievements.
3. Value your child's ideas and opinions.
4. Make an effort to spend one on one time with your child, in addition to family time.
5. Encourage your child to be open with you about their feelings. It's important that they are comfortable turning to you for help in difficult or confusing situations. This could be for advice, to work together to find solutions, or just to listen.
6. Encourage good physical health. Physical fitness will help your child stay healthy, have more energy, feel confident, manage stress and sleep well.
7. Help them develop and maintain good eating habits and a healthy diet.

HOW TO START A CONVERSATION ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH

Regularly promoting an environment where a teenager feels confident talking about mental health is important, but that's not always going to mean that they open up about an issue. You may have noticed a change in your child, and you want to check in with them to make sure they're okay.

Before you begin the conversation, it's helpful to remember the following:

1. Often young people are worried about their parents being upset, anxious, overwhelmed, shocked, angry or blaming.
2. If a young person can see that their parent might be able to respond calmly and listen without judgement, they are more likely to begin a conversation.

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3. Think about what might help the conversation. For example, does the young person find it easier to talk while driving or going for a walk? Would the teenager find it easier out of the house with no interruptions? Or to have someone else there for support?

At the outset of the conversation, try and take the following on board:

1. Begin the conversation in a non-judgmental way and let your child know what you have noticed. This could be that they don't seem to be hanging out or talking to their friends as much as usual, their schoolwork seems to be suffering, their mood has deteriorated, or they are posting sad or concerning material on social media.
2. Acknowledge that opening up about personal thoughts and feelings can be hard and sometimes scary but doing so is more beneficial than not.
3. Reassure the young person that you will be there for them and ask if they need anything from you.
4. Above all, be genuine. Teens can see right through an adult who is "faking it." If you're feeling uncomfortable in a discussion with a young person, admit it.
5. A particularly good line to use can be along the lines of: *"This is hard for me to talk about, so I totally understand if it's difficult for you too."*

WHAT TO DO IF A TEENAGER OPENS UP ABOUT THEIR MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

If your child discloses they are suffering from poor or deteriorating mental health you should:

1. Listen. Active listening means stopping the voice in your own head and trying to pay attention to the person who is speaking while remaining calm and understanding throughout.
2. When they are done talking, ask if they've thought about what they might need to feel better. If they haven't, offer to support, listen and talk it out with them. If they have, support them in following through with their needs.

3. Normalise their situation. This doesn't mean undermining how they're feeling, but simply noting that having a mental health issue is common, and that they can get better — similar to how physical ailments can heal.
4. Ask if they would like to see a mental health professional and, if so, if they would like you to organise this.
5. While you don't want to betray your child's trust by talking to your partner, for example, about the situation, it's important that the teenager feels supported by everyone in their immediate family. We should normalise the topic of mental health and encourage our teens to open up about their experiences rather than think there is something wrong with them.

While the above **'do's'** are vital in a conversation with a teenager about mental health, the below **'don'ts'** are just as important:

1. Don't minimise how they are feeling or tell them "you shouldn't think that way." It's likely they worried about opening up to you in the first place, so the discussion should be a positive one.
2. Keep your own emotions in check — especially if you're angry. It's not uncommon for parents to blame themselves, but negative statements like "You're never gonna get it together, are you?" are not helpful. It can instead add to their stress and shut down open communication between you. Remember, you are likely not the problem, but you can be part of the solution.
3. Never tell your child what they SHOULD do. You can offer advice given your own experiences, but you should ask what they want you to help them with.
4. Don't argue with your child. If you encounter resistance from your child, go back to listening, ask open ended questions and repeat what they've said.
5. Avoid comparing your child to other siblings. Saying things like "Your brother/sister doesn't have these problems. Why can't you be more like him/her?" certainly won't help the situation.

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WHAT IF THE TEENAGER IS NOT YOUR CHILD?

You may find yourself talking to an adolescent who is not part of your immediate family. If this occurs, implement the following strategies:

1. Begin by asking if the young person has shared the problem with their parents. 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."
2. Offer to help the teenager 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.
3. If you suspect abuse or neglect, visit the Australian Institute of Family Studies to find contact details of a child support organisation in your state, or call 000.

Ultimately, the more normal we make conversations about mental health, the easier having these conversations will be. We know that one conversation can be pivotal when it comes to getting a young person the help they may need.

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