

Having a conversation with someone about their mental health

Coronavirus has thrown all our lives, our communities and the UK into an unprecedented crisis. We understand that lots of people will be feeling concerned right now about coronavirus. Those feelings are completely normal. With coronavirus putting extra pressure on young people and their mental health, one of Action for Children's mental health practitioners has created the following guidance to help you tackle having a conversation with someone about their mental health.

Having a conversation with someone about their mental health can seem scary. Many people often worry about what to say or believe that they may say the 'wrong' thing. One in four adults and one in eight children are diagnosed with a mental health condition.* You never know when someone may decide to talk to you about their mental health and the support you offer can be extremely valuable.



Listen

Often people just need someone to listen and want to share their stories. Just giving someone the space to talk can be very helpful. Thank them for sharing their story with you and remember that it's OK not to know what to say. Be honest about this and direct them to further support.

Normalise mental health

We all have mental health and any one of us can go through times of difficulty. Mental health is best described as existing on a scale; ranging from being emotionally healthy and having good mental health, to experiencing mental health problems in the middle, to receiving a diagnosis of a mental health illness.

Stay calm

Think of your body language; try not to react and stay calm if someone decides to have a conversation with you about their mental health. It can be difficult but try to avoid showing feelings of panic or surprise and make sure you take what they say seriously. By not reacting, people are more likely to talk to you about how they're feeling.

Be non-judgemental

Being non-judgemental and not making assumptions about people's experiences is very important. Display empathy and compassion when possible by replying with comments such as "I'm sorry to hear that" and "it sounds like things have been really difficult for you".

Letting loved ones know

After listening to someone, encourage them to talk to a loved one about how they're feeling. Some people can find this challenging to do because they believe other people will judge them or they think they have let people down. If they struggle to put into words how they are feeling, suggest they write things down instead: through a letter, email or text message if easier. It's important for them to realise that it's OK for them to go through times of difficulty and that talking to those they trust will help.

Encourage social contact

People can often feel very lonely when experiencing problems with their mental health. Try to encourage those who talk to you about their mental health to maintain contact with people they care about. This has proven to be helpful in maintaining positive mental health.



Accessing information

Remember to be patient as people may not want to seek help immediately and may seem reluctant to do so. Encourage them to use trusted websites which provide information about mental health and provide useful self-help strategies they could try. Our website at the end of this pack has resources and links to further support.

Getting professional help

Provide reassurance that although seeking help can seem scary, it's important to do because many people can fully recover from a mental health problem. Let them know there are many different treatments available which they can access through their GP. This includes medication and several psychological therapies, which can be delivered face-to-face, online or in a group setting. Be realistic in terms of what you can do as it's up to the person to seek the support themselves.

Risk

It's very important that if someone mentions to you that they're at risk of harming themselves or others that you seek medical help immediately, either by contacting the emergency services or by taking them to hospital. If possible, stay with them until help arrives and avoid leaving them alone. If someone discloses abuse to you or if you suspect there are any child protection concerns, it's vital you contact the police or social services.

Self care

Talking to someone about their mental health and hearing their stories can be emotional. It's essential that if you feel affected by a conversation you've had, that you talk to someone about how you're feeling and take a break when needed.



For more information on supporting adults, as well as children and young people struggling with their mental health, please visit: minds.actionforchildren.org.uk