

Conversation Guide: Talking to your friend about mental health



Mental Health UK

Approaching a conversation

Spotting the signs of poor mental health

Some of the things you may notice about a friend that are concerning you:

- Withdrawing from your friendship group
- Changes in mood and behaviour
- Becoming more aggressive towards others
- Not communicating the way they normally do
- Eating more, eating less or comfort eating



Listen and give them your full attention



Offer reassurance that you are there to listen. Try not to be distracted with other things, it's important that they know you are dedicating your full attention to them. Let them know they have done the right thing by speaking to you.

If you don't know what to say, remember that you don't need to find an answer, or even understand their feelings. Listening will let them know you care.

Validate what they are saying

It can be hard sometimes to get out what we want to say. It can help if we are told our experiences and feelings are valid and by doing this your friend will know they are not alone. You can tell them that it's ok to be feeling the way they are.

Don't make assumptions as this may make your friend feel more uncomfortable and do encourage them to take their time. Everyone has had times when they have struggled with their mental health.



Give the conversation the time needed

It might be the first time that your friend has spoken to anyone about their mental health, and they may struggle. They might not go into much detail.

If your friend is struggling to express themselves, you can suggest they write it down or draw how they are feeling. This can help explain their feelings if talking is difficult.

What you can do to support your friend?

Ask your friend what they would like from you.

This is a good way to understand your friend's expectations. It also lets them know you are there to help and support. You could offer to help them get an appointment with their GP, speak with a trusted teacher at school or help them find support online and through helplines.

If you don't feel comfortable with something they are asking you to do, you can say that and tell them what you would be comfortable doing.



You don't need to have all the answers - if you don't know what to say or don't understand their situation and what they are going through, that's ok. Remember that you don't need to find an answer, or even understand their feelings. Allowing your friend the space and time to speak to you is already amazing.

Where you can, take action - share what you do know. If you have found a helpline or a website useful in the past, share that with your friend. You could go through the signposting document we've provided or a helpful website together.

Normalise things - it's good to remember that sometimes people can feel shy or embarrassed once they have had these conversations. So, it's important to continue doing things together, going to a café, a walk, shopping etc. This will help reassure them. Remember, just by being there for your friend, you are doing something great.

If you are worried about your friend, encourage them to speak to others - a trusted adult such as a teacher, a sports coach, or a youth worker. If you can, support them if they are worried about doing this by going with them or being there when they make a phone call.

Checking-in - a day or two after the conversation with your friend check-in and see how they are doing. This will let them know you are there to support them.

If they don't feel like talking, that's ok, it's important to respect their boundaries and give them the time they need.



Looking after yourself!

How do you manage confidentiality?

There may be things your friend tells you that are personal and worrying. They may ask you to keep it to yourself and not to tell anyone but remember the most important thing is their safety and wellbeing.

If you are worried that your friend is at risk, you should speak to a trusted adult, a youth worker, a teacher, or GP. You can let your friend know you will be doing this because you care. They might find this difficult at first, but they will eventually understand you did it because you want to help and support them.

If you are finding things difficult, it's ok to say that - if you feel you are unable to help your friend and it's causing you stress, it's ok to speak up. You can be honest with your friend and say you are struggling, but that you can share some of the places where they can get help.

By doing this you are protecting your own mental health. It might make you feel like you are not being a good friend, but this is not the case. By listening to your friend and being honest with them about how you are, you are making sure they get the best support available for them.

Putting some boundaries in place - we can end up doing things that we don't feel comfortable with. By setting some boundaries you are communicating what is okay for you and what isn't. For example, if talking to your friend after school is better than during lunchtime - tell them. By protecting your mental health and wellbeing you will be in a better position to support your friend.

Practising self-care and taking time for yourself - taking time will allow you to think about what's going on and how best to process it. Do things that you enjoy and make you feel good, such as going for a walk, watching TV or writing and drawing which can help you relax and reflect.

The most important thing to remember is you don't have to do this alone - it's not all up to you.

Reach out for support - if you feel like you are struggling, ask for help. Have a look at our signposting document.



SCAN ME

Looking after your resilience can be really important, have a look at some of our resilience animations.



SCAN ME

