

# Conversation Guide: Talking to young people about mental health



Mental  
Health  
UK

## Starting Conversations - The 4 P's: its all about planning

### Plan what you want to say

**Be open:** Perhaps speak about the fact you are concerned and explain what you have noticed that made you feel worried.

**Normalise:** Speaking about how you are feeling is brave – tell them it is nothing to be ashamed of. Talk about how we all have ups and downs.

**Try not to panic:** You aren't expected to have all the answers, you're there to listen and guide them. You can't be prepared for everything they will share.

### Plan the best time to have the conversation

**Think about the setting:** consider who else is around and can potentially overhear the conversation, ask them where would you like to talk?

**Timing:** What else are they doing or going to be doing around that time. Be respectful of their priorities and when is the best time.

**Give your full attention:** Try not to multitask, it is important to convey that you are giving your full attention to the conversation.

### Plan how you are going to encourage them to open up

**Avoid labels:** Think of ways that you can discuss things without using labels like 'mental health' or naming conditions such as anxiety or depression - it might shut down the conversation.

**Listen and empathise:** Empathy helps young people connect and requires you to try and understand how they are feeling. Listen to their point of view - it can be more helpful than giving advice.

**Don't make assumptions:** Young people told us that one of the ways people shut down conversations with them is to assume you know how they feel or what their issues are

### Plan what will happen following the conversation

**Act:** Be aware of anything worrying that you might need to act on and refer to our signposting advice below who can provide specialist support.

**Avoid easy solutions:** What would help someone or what they want to happen will be different for everyone. Don't try to 'fix' or give advice as your first response.

**Don't diagnose:** You won't be in a position to diagnose a mental illness. Even if you've gone through something similar yourself.

## Quick tools for conversations

**Initial conversation:** discuss the relationship with physical health and mental health so they can recognise they have the power to maintain and improve their own mental health.

**Resilience:** Young people hear a lot about resilience - explain what resilience means to you, and then ask what it means to them.

**Wellbeing:** Highlight how a positive mindset can be important. It's also ok to have difficult emotions when times are hard.

**Normal stressors:** these are things that 95% of people experience. It's important to recognise that feeling stressed about these things is not a sign of mental illness.

**Work productively:** Help them to draw on examples when they've worked at their best. How did they manage to do that?

**Curiosity:** Having a curious mindset and attitude can help us be open to different options and alternatives about our future. Start a conversation by asking what are they curious about.

**Stress:** Stress can help us in many situations but too much can be unhelpful. Help them explore strategies. What do they use in stressful situations? What else could they try which is new to them?

**Inner critic vs inner coach:** We all have thoughts that aren't based on fact. Young people have a lot of pressure on them to act, behave and look in a certain way. Get them to challenge their inner critic and support their inner coach!

**Celebrate small steps:** Encourage celebration of small wins, reminding them of ones they may not have noticed themselves.

**Reflection:** Completing a resilience graph (see our Parents and Carers Guide) will show that their days are not always perfect and there are down times. But resilience can help them get through. Try and make it make this a feature of 'everyday reflection'.

**Making Decisions:** If they need support in making decisions use the 'for and against' tool from our guide to help them look at the positive and negative factors in decision making.

**Rational Coping Statements:** Challenge negative thoughts that are based on feelings and opinions, help them to come up with rational coping statements.

## Signposting for support

### Learn more about mental health conditions



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**Parent and Carers Guide** – A guide to support you when talking to your child about mental health and the important role resilience has to play.



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**Signposting Document** – A list of contact information for mental health support services that may be useful for yourself or your child.



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