

Conversation Guide: Talking to young people about mental health

Talking about mental health might feel hard, but reaching out to someone who's struggling can really help them. It shows them they're not alone and that you care.

The most important thing you can do is listen. Let them share only what they feel comfortable telling you. When you have an open and supportive conversation, it helps them talk about their feelings and what's happening. It might also encourage them to get more help if they need it.

This guide will help you have these important conversations with confidence and care.



Starting conversations

Give your full attention and listen without judgement

Be open: Start by letting them know you're concerned about them. Be specific about what you've noticed that made you worried.

Normalise: Speaking about feelings is brave and you could tell them there is nothing to be ashamed of.

Try not to worry: You aren't expected to have the answers, nor give advice — you're there to listen.

It's all in the planning

Plan when and where to have the conversation

Setting: Consider their privacy — ask them where they would feel comfortable talking. Is the setting safe to talk without interruption? Is it quiet and away from distractions?

Timing: Be respectful of their priorities and check what is the best time for them to explore their thoughts and feelings.

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 to encourage them to open up

Avoid labels and stereotypes: Take time to consider your responses. Be careful to avoid labels and stereotypes as this can shut down a conversation. Avoid naming conditions as you are not there to diagnose.

Listen and empathise: Empathy will help build an open and trusting connection. Show that you are listening and understand how they feel by summarising what they have said and asking supportive questions that explore the situation further.

Don't make assumptions: Young people may withdraw from talking if you assume how they feel and what their issues are. Listen and ask open questions to explore their situation so you are not in danger of assuming.

Plan what will happen after the conversation

Act: If you are made aware of anything that could place the young person at risk of harm or of harming others, you should encourage them to reach out to professional support, such as their GP. Depending on the setting of this conversation you should consider flagging the risk to a responsible adult. For example, if in a school setting, you could inform their teacher.

Avoid easy solutions: Don't try to 'fix' or give advice — you are there to listen to their concerns. It is better to empower the person to find their own solution through open questions, e.g., "What would you find helpful at the moment?"

Don't diagnose: Attempting to diagnose a mental health condition isn't expected or helpful at this stage. Hold back from sharing too much of your experiences and let them find their own words to describe what they are going through.



Quick conversation tools

Ask twice and rephrase: Asking twice how they are and leaving a pause might encourage them to open up and provide a thoughtful response. For example, “How are you feeling today,” followed up with, “Has anything been on your mind lately?” Reframing the question not only helps the other person to reconsider how they are but also shows genuine interest.

Be creative: It's sometimes hard to find the words, so you could think out of the box to help the conversation start. Consider the use of colours, imagery, symbols, music, etc. For example, “What weather are you experiencing today?” “What colour would your mood be today and why?”

Signs and symptoms: Talk about different aspects of their experiences in terms of their emotions, behaviours, and physical signs. This can help develop emotional literacy as well as an appreciation for how things interlink.

Reassurance: They may have concerns about expressing their thoughts and feelings, so ask them if there are any barriers or worries that might be holding them back from sharing. Clarify what will and won't be shared so they feel psychologically safe.

Normalise: Used sparingly after listening, this can encourage openness, as they will know they are not alone in feeling the way they do. Avoid using this to downplay their situation; use it to validate their response and reduce shame and isolation. For example, “Many young people struggle with this so you are not alone — but everyone is different. Would it be helpful to talk about your thoughts and feelings?”

Inner critic vs. inner coach: Young people often feel pressure to act, behave, and look a certain way. Getting them to challenge their inner critic and support their inner coach can help them establish what thoughts are factual and which are an assumption.

Curiosity: Encourage them to look at different perspectives, test out their assumptions, put themselves in another's shoes. Fostering a curious mindset can help us be open to different alternatives and options.

Reflection: Once you have actively listened it would be helpful to reflect back and confirm your understanding of their feelings and challenges. Through doing this they may have other aspects they want to expand and reflect on together.

Empower agency: They might feel powerless or unable to change a situation. Using open questions and prompting curiosity, explore what they can change and control within their situation. This will help shift their perspective, empower them to act, and encourage resilience. For example, “What aspects of this situation feel within your control?”

Resilience: Exploring what resilience means to them invites them to acknowledge their existing strengths and strategies, as well as ones to develop. It will help them to consider their wellbeing from an holistic perspective and identify what they need to nurture. For example, “Can you tell me about a time when something was difficult for you, but you got through it anyway? What helped you keep going?”

Acknowledge and celebrate: Recognising progress or achievements will boost their confidence and motivation. This encourages a continuous learning approach, where they see positive results from their actions. They may be unaware of their achievements so flag them and consider asking them, “What does this achievement tell you about yourself?” so they can actively praise themselves.

Taking thoughts to court: If they need support to reach a decision, encourage them to look at different perspectives, e.g., positive, negative; for and against, or pros and cons. This will help them evaluate their options/choices and develop critical thinking skills.

Leave the door open: Knowing they can talk to you in future will reassure as well as empower them to make changes. Periodic check-ins might be helpful as they navigate their way through the situation or challenges. It shows that they are not alone and that you care about how they are feeling beyond the conversation.



Signposting

Learn more about mental health conditions



If you want to learn more about different mental health conditions, we've got information on symptoms, treatments, and useful contacts on a variety of conditions. [mentalhealth-uk.org/help-and-information/conditions](https://www.mentalhealth-uk.org/help-and-information/conditions)

Young people's resources



Watch our animated videos exploring key topics young people consider essential for their mental health resilience. [mentalhealth-uk.org/partnerships/young-peoples-resources](https://www.mentalhealth-uk.org/partnerships/young-peoples-resources)

Parents and carers resources



Our website contains information and tools to support you having a conversation about mental health, emotional wellbeing and resilience with young people. [mentalhealth-uk.org/help-and-information/advice-for-parents-and-guardians](https://www.mentalhealth-uk.org/help-and-information/advice-for-parents-and-guardians)

Resources



Access downloadable guides, tools, and resources to support your mental health, enhance wellbeing, and build resilience, while also promoting awareness and understanding of mental health. [mentalhealth-uk.org/downloadable-resources](https://www.mentalhealth-uk.org/downloadable-resources)

If you're concerned a young person may harm themselves or others it's important to report your concerns to the appropriate authority.

Depending on the circumstances, this could be a teacher, parent or carer, or local authority.

You can contact the NHS in an emergency: 999 or non-emergency: 111.