How to start a conversation about mental health

A GUIDE TO SPEAKING ABOUT A SENSITIVE TOPIC

It can be difficult for someone to talk about their struggles with mental health and addiction. But creating a judgement-free zone and initiating a supportive conversation may provide the encouragement they need to seek help.

The guidance of a mental health professional can greatly assist your ability to have meaningful and safe conversation. It is strongly advised that you seek professional consultation before initiating this discussion.

01 | When to start a conversation

While this checklist doesn’t necessarily mean that someone is struggling with their mental health, it can act as a great indicator for when you should check in on your loved ones, friends or coworkers.

CHANGES IN APPEARANCE
- Bloodshot or glassy eyes
- Unprofessional appearance or poor hygiene
- Unexplained injuries such as cuts, bruises, scrapes or marks
- Dramatic weight loss or gain

CHANGES IN ENERGY LEVELS OR MOOD
- Exhaustion or fatigue
- Loss of interest in pleasures of life
- Unpredictable mood swings, irritability or aggression
- Inappropriate verbal or emotional responses and behaviours
- Relationship disharmony (e.g. how they speak about loved ones)

ARE YOU THE RIGHT PERSON TO START THIS CONVERSATION?
- You are trusted
- You can speak calmly and rationally
- You can avoid making accusations or judgements

02 | How to start the conversation

Once you’ve decided to have a conversation about mental health, you should consider how you will broach the topic. Firstly, try to find a quiet and private place to speak, and ensure that the person is not under the influence or in a manic state. Consider using or adapting the following phrases to begin the conversation.

• Is there anything I can do for you right now? What do you think you need at this moment in time?
• What do you usually do to cope with stress? Have you found anything that works well for you?

03 | How to provide support

So you’ve started the conversation. What’s next?

• Stay supportive. Listen and take them seriously.
• Stay in touch. Check in regularly and sensitively.
• Stay curious. Be tactful and compassionate when inquiring.
• Stay aware. Take note of helpful resources and offer to share them.
• Stay vigilant. If someone is talking about ending their life, this could be a medical emergency. Call 911 and stay calm until help arrives.

04 | Conversational Do’s and Don’ts

Things to keep in mind during these tough conversations.

DO
- Listen and take their concerns seriously
- Ask them what they need
- Talk about options for support
- Remain calm at all times

DON’T
- Judge or criticize
- Worry about having all the answers
- Force communication, lecture, or try to fix the problem
- Use a confrontational approach to incite guilt or shame