

Conversation Guide: Talking to someone about mental health

Starting a conversation about mental health can be difficult or feel overwhelming, but reaching out when someone is struggling can make a real difference. It shows them they're not alone and someone cares about them.

Listening to them will be a priority, as well as respecting their boundaries as to how much they wish to tell you. An open and supportive conversation will not only help them feel empowered to speak about their feelings, the situation, and potential next steps — it may also help them seek further support.

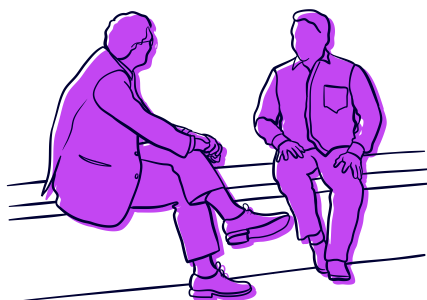
This guide will help you navigate these important conversations with confidence, compassion, and care.



Spotting the signs of poor mental health: notice the changes

Physical symptoms

- Headaches
- Muscle tension/back ache
- Tight jaw/grinding teeth
- Raised heart rate/faster breathing
- Changes in appetite
- Stomach problems
- Difficulty sleeping



Behavioural symptoms

- Avoiding and blaming others
- Eating more, eating less, or comfort eating
- Using alcohol, substances, or smoking
- Snapping at others
- Decreased performance
- Social withdrawal
- Difficulty concentrating
- Biting nails
- Worrying about the past or future
- Racing thoughts
- Panic attacks
- Problems concentrating
- Memory lapses/forgetting things
- Difficulty making decisions
- Unable to think clearly

Emotional symptoms

- Frightened
- Fearful, worried and/or anxious
- Angry and/or irritable
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Shame
- Disproportionate reactions, e.g. overreacting, underreacting
- Sadness and/or low mood
- Rapid mood changes

Dos and don'ts to having a supportive conversation

Find the right time and space

Before having the conversation, check that it is the right time and space for them. Ensure you can give the time and attention needed. Consider issues of privacy, noise, distractions, other commitments, practicalities, etc.

Actively listen without judgement

Ensure they feel able to share as much or as little as they are comfortable to — without being judged.

Ask open questions

Asking these type of questions encourages them to explore their thoughts and feelings. "I've noticed you haven't seemed yourself lately. What has been on your mind?" Try not to ask too many questions and give them time to respond.

Avoid making assumptions

You're not expected to be an expert. 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.

Acknowledge and validate

It might be tempting to silver-line situations to make someone feel better but it's important to acknowledge what they are saying. Saying "don't be silly, you're okay" could make them withdraw, become frustrated and angry. Instead say, "I can see this has really upset you," etc.

Avoid comparisons

Sometimes we can be tempted to draw a comparison to our own story, to show empathy. However, it could also discourage the other person from opening up. It's important the conversation is about them — so share sparingly.

Reflect back and clarify

By seeking clarity, you are showing them you are listening and want to know more. Avoid making assumptions and putting words into their mouth. Consider saying: "When you say..., do you mean...?" or "Could you tell me more about...?"

Show empathy rather than sympathy

Empathic responses show that you understand where the person is coming from, whereas sympathy often expresses pity. Rather than saying, "I'm sorry for you" say, "That must be really difficult, I'm sorry you are going through this."

Empower them to find solutions

It's important to listen first and not go straight to solutions. It's also better that next steps come from them. Ask questions that help them think of what to do next: "What do you think would help?"

Avoid advising and suggesting an easy solution

What you think might help someone may not be right for them. Suggesting easy solutions might invalidate their feelings. Try to avoid going into 'fix' mode.

Avoid diagnosing

Regardless of your observations and experiences you are not there to diagnose a mental illness. If you are concerned about them, encourage them to seek support from their GP, or they can contact NHS 111 service.

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



Speak to your GP

Let them know they can book a double appointment with their GP to discuss their mental health, so they don't feel rushed. They can request for a family member or friend to attend the appointment with them. nhs.uk/service-search/find-a-gp



Access the Hub of Hope

Comprehensive online directory connecting people to mental health support services in their local area across the UK. hubofhope.co.uk



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

