

Talking about Mental Health

Talking to someone about their mental health can be difficult. That's why we've included some strategies below on how to prepare for, start, and continue the conversation so that your friend or family member feels heard and supported.

Preparing for the Conversation



Be Present

- Focus less on what you are doing so that you can better connect to the person you are speaking with. This will help keep you calm and give space for the individual to feel more comfortable.

Don't Try to Fix It

- Trying to solve how a person is feeling puts the focus of the conversation on you and places unnecessary pressure on yourself. It also heightens the chances of you not properly hearing what the individual has to say.

Accept that it Won't be Easy

- Mental health conversations are hard. But you aren't there to offer professional advice or feedback. You are there to listen and support. You will want to prepare yourself, though, to hear serious difficulties someone you care about is facing. Both you and they should be offered grace and kindness as you enter the conversation.

Take Some Deep Breaths

- This will help calm your own anxiousness and enter the conversation with calm.

Starting the Conversation

Start Small

- Start slowly so you are both comfortable. Open the conversation as you would any other: *Hey, how's your day going? Check out this post I saw. How was class today?*
- Look for a natural opportunity to broach the topic. When you see it, go for it!

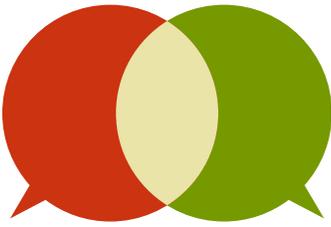
Listen and Look

- Along with what they are saying, look for behavioural cues. People can say they are fine, but their body language might tell a different story. Or maybe you saw something in a previous interaction that is concerning. Pay attention to non-verbal observations, too.

Open with a Question

- Building off the observations you've noticed, you might start by pointing out something you've observed:
 - "I noticed you seemed a bit off last week. Did something happen?"
 - "You seem a bit withdrawn. Do you want to talk about it?"





Be Persistent and Patient:

- Avoid pushing the conversation if they are not comfortable. You can try more than once, but pay attention to their reaction. If they are not comfortable, respect their reaction and do not continue.
- Affirm your support and willingness to talk in the future.

Active Listening

- Active Listening is an effective way of showing you are invested in the conversation and value what a person is saying. It can create safety and trust, which is essential when someone is speaking about their mental health. Consider the following as you listen:
 - Posture: Face the person and lean in to show you are engaged in the conversation.
 - Key Words or Phrases: Pay attention to how they describe their feelings or circumstances. Then repeat these when you respond to show you have paid attention.
 - Tone of Voice: Listen carefully to their tone of voice to pinpoint underlying emotions.
 - Pay careful attention to YOUR tone of voice, too. Remain calm and speak slowly, even if they are speaking quickly.
 - Questions: Ask questions as needed to clearly understand what they have said:
 - What did you mean by [X]?
 - What was it like to go through [Y]?
 - What does [Z] feel like?



Continuing the Conversation

- Consider Involving Others
 - Help them recognize who else can be of support (friends, family, doctor, counsellor, etc.)
- Connect Again
 - Be intentional about following-up. A text message, email, or phone call can make a huge difference in showing you genuinely care. If they respond, bring up something they shared with you in your first conversation.
 - But be patient. It can be overwhelming to open up, and they may need space afterwards. Think about whether the time of your message is appropriate given what they shared.
 - **Be Available.**
 - Only reach out if you plan to be available to the person. Their mental health can be negatively impacted if they see you as being unreliable or unavailable.



Starting a mental health conversation can be difficult, but for someone who is struggling, it can make a huge difference. Just by listening and showing concern, both of you will feel the positive impact of the conversation.