

TALKING ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH: TIPS FOR PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS FROM YOUNG PEOPLE

Starting the Conversation

Knowing when and how to talk to your child or teen about their mental health is hard! As a parent or caregiver, you're uniquely positioned to be their biggest ally. Here are some tips that young people shared for having successful conversations about mental health.

Talk to your child or teen about mental health often, not just when you notice red flags or have concerns. Having regular conversations about how they are doing can create a trusting and safe environment that can make future conversations easier.



This Tip Sheet was created by young people who have experienced mental health challenges. These youth shared what has helped and what they wish parents and caregivers would say and do when talking about mental health.

What should parents and caregivers DO?

Listen to understand.



Let your child or teen take the lead during the discussion. Stop what you're doing so you can be fully present and focus on what is being said, rather than thinking ahead about how you'll respond. Sometimes young people just need someone who will listen without judgement.

What can this look like?

- "Thanks for trusting me to listen."
- "Would you rather go to a quieter place to talk about this?"
- "Can you tell me a little more about how you are feeling?"

Ask questions without making assumptions.



Actively reflect on what your child is saying to make sure you really understand. Asking questions will help you understand the situation better and can help them feel like you're committed to helping them. Avoid assuming that you know what they're feeling or experiencing. Try to remain calm during the conversation and pay attention to the tone of your questions.

What can this look like?

- "It sounds like you've been having a really hard time. Do you feel like that's true?"
- "Can you tell me more about that?"
- "What can I do to support you?"



Your mental health can also impact your child or teen, so taking care of your own needs and finding support is critical.

Validate their experiences.



When your child or teen talks to you about their well-being and mental health, create a welcoming and safe environment by validating their experiences and recognizing that it may be hard for them to share this information. Young people experience trust and are more likely to seek help when parents and caregivers demonstrate nonjudgmental attitudes and behaviors.

What can this look like?

- “Talking about your emotions is hard, and I’m proud of you for doing it. That’s something I had to learn how to do.”
- “What you’re feeling is valid.”
- “It’s okay to feel this way.”

Be partners in what comes next.



Work together to figure out the next steps. While you may think medication or therapy might be best, talk about options and listen to their concerns and feelings. Work with your child or teen at their own pace. If you don’t perceive an immediate threat to their safety, give them a little time to think and process their emotions before you check back with them.

What can this look like?

- “Thank you for talking to me. How are you feeling now?”
- “Now that we’ve talked, what do you think we should do next?”
- “Let’s figure this out together. I will listen to you, and I hope you’ll listen to me.”

Seek support from others.



It’s natural for your child or teen to feel more comfortable discussing certain topics with a friend, peer support, therapist, or other trusted adult. Work with them to find others who can support and listen.

What can this look like?

- Help your child or teen identify 2-3 additional people they can turn to if they need to talk. A counselor or peer support program may be a good place to start.
- If you are concerned about your child you can call, text, or chat the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline to talk to a trained counselor and to learn more about available resources in your area.



Where can you find more resources?

- Behavioral Health Information for Parents and Caregivers: <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/behavioral-health>
- Mental Health Parent and Caregiver Resources: <https://www.samhsa.gov/families/parent-caregiver-resources>
- Youth Mental Health: <https://youth.gov/youth-topics/youth-mental-health>
- 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline:
Call, text, or chat 988, or visit <https://988lifeline.org> 24/7 for yourself or a loved one. Help is available in English, Spanish, and ASL.