

Having conversations about mental ill-health

Having a conversation about mental health can seem difficult, but it is important to be prepared. Knowing what to say and how to say it will improve your confidence and facilitate healthy interactions with your friends, family, or colleagues. Use the tips in this sheet to help you have effective conversations.

Steps to follow

While every conversation about mental health may go differently, there are some basic steps you can take to help the conversation flow and help the person you are talking to feel supported.

Find the right time and place to talk

Find a private place where the person will feel comfortable and you won't be overheard or disrupted. Be sure to leave plenty of time to talk.

Focus on specific behaviours

Start the conversation by mentioning something specific you have noticed, for example, "you have seemed really tired lately, is everything alright?".

Be calm, open, and honest

Make sure your tone and posture are relaxed. Be as transparent as possible during the conversation, this will encourage the other person to do the same.

Ask questions

Asking questions shows you are listening and will keep the conversation going. Phrase questions in a way that will get you more than a one-word response.

Listen without judgement

Listen to what the person is saying, do not interrupt, and acknowledge their feelings. Try summarising what they have said and repeating it back to them.

Reassure the person

Let them know it is okay for them to feel the way they do, even if the problem doesn't seem big to you. Reassure them that support is available.

Offer help and support

You are not expected to fix their problems, but you can assist in ways such as booking them an appointment, going for a walk with them or chatting.

Direct to support services

Encourage the person to get professional help. They could start by doing an online chat or calling a support service. You should also suggest they see a GP.

Follow-up

Check in again after a few days or a week to see if they have taken any steps or if things have changed. Continue to offer support and encourage help-seeking.

Conversation-starter tips

Starting the conversation can be the hardest part of talking to someone about mental health. Once you get the conversation started, you are likely to feel more comfortable and confident. Below are some tips and that might help you begin.



- There is no one right way to start a conversation – the main thing is that you are being genuine and thoughtful
- Start by asking about something other than mental health, like work or family
- Use 'I' statements such as 'I have noticed...' or 'I care about you'. 'You' statements can sound like you are blaming them, even if you are not
- Focus on something you have noticed about them that you are concerned about, rather than just asking if they are alright
- Be direct and do not try to skirt around what you are trying to say

Non-verbal communication tips

When having a conversation about mental ill-health, it's not only important to consider what you say, but also how you will act. Non-verbal communication can be just as important as your words and can help build trust and foster helpful conversations. Below is a list of helpful non-verbal communication techniques.

- Speak clearly and not too fast
- Ask only one question at a time
- Stay alert and focussed on the person
- Give nods of understanding as they talk
- Keep gestures smooth and unobtrusive
- Avoid using feet and legs as a barrier
- Maintain frequent eye contact
- Smile when appropriate
- Stay calm and relaxed
- Minimise other distraction (e.g. radio)
- Show empathy and care for their feelings
- Do not interrupt when they are talking

