

Tips to starting a conversation with someone you care about

As a society, we are very hesitant when it comes to discussing things that aren't considered to be 'our business'. Often, many of us will wait for someone to approach us with their problems, rather than pushing into their space and persuading them to open up. Sometimes, people are sending out a cry for help letting us know that they are not being heard, or they may be too scared to ask for it in the first place. Talking to someone about their mental health isn't always easy, but it could help them get better. Below are some tips on how to start the conversation.

Headspace offers these tips for starting conversation with people you may be concerned about. (<https://headspace.org.au/explore-topics/supporting-a-young-person/how-to-start-the-conversation-about-mental-health/>)

Step 1: Managing yourself

When starting a conversation about mental health it is important to first reflect on how you are feeling. If you are worried or upset, this could come across your person. People are often hyper aware of how family and friends might respond to their experiences and can worry about burdening those around them. People feel and respond differently when having conversations about mental health. Some will want to avoid the conversation while others may go into 'fix it' mode; some will not understand how or why others may be experiencing these thoughts or feelings. To be supportive, it is important to stay calm, listen and validate your person's experiences so they feel safe and supported.

Step 2: Setting the scene

A good relationship with your person is a great start to being able to talk about mental health. Spend time doing things together and take an interest in their activities outside of talking about sensitive topics. This can increase the likelihood of them talking openly about mental health. Thinking about the where, when and how you approach the conversation can positively influence the outcome.

Before starting a conversation:

- Make sure you are feeling calm and open to listening.
- Be aware of your nonverbal communication like body language and tone of voice. These things can be just as important as what you say.
- Think about where you will have the talk. Perhaps go for a drive or a walk. Public or private space?
- Take their feelings seriously. Listen carefully, reflect back and don't judge (it can be more useful at times to say nothing than to propose answers or solutions).
- Take a 'you and me vs the problem' approach. This lets them know you will figure it out together.

Step 3: Starting the conversation

There is no perfect way to start a conversation about mental health. Sometimes it can be helpful to begin with general and open questions such as:

- How is [work/school/sport/family] going?
- How are you getting along with our [friends, family, colleagues]?
- How are you feeling about your [projects/studying/exams/friends/family]?

When focusing on more specific thoughts and feelings, 'I' statements are important such as:

- I've noticed that you seem to have a lot on your mind lately. I'm happy to talk or listen and see if I can help
- I feel like you [haven't been yourself lately/have been up and down] - how are things?

- You seem [anxious/sad/distracted/tired/withdrawn] - What is happening for you? Just letting you know that I care, and we can work it out together
- It's OK if you don't want to talk to me. You could talk to the person that you trust the most. I want you to know that I care and am concerned.

How you talk with your person will depend on their age and understanding. The language you use should feel natural. If your person opens up about their mental health, reassure them early on that you are glad and relieved that they're talking to you.

Here is a list of some statements and questions that can help you talk with someone you are concerned about.

Quick One Liners to Open Conversations and Let Others Know You Care

- How are you feeling?
- How are you doing?
- I'm here to listen if you need it.
- I'm worried about you.
- Let's go for a walk.
- Seems like you are having a rough day.
- I appreciate that this may be difficult for you.
- Can you tell me how you are feeling?
- You don't seem to be yourself lately. What's going on?
- What can I do to help you?
- What has been the best and worst part of your week?
- What is something that I can do differently to help you?
- Seems like something is up. Do you want to talk about it?
- Hey, we haven't talked in a while. How are you doing?
- I know that you are going through some difficult things right now. I am here to talk if you need me.
- No matter what you are going through, I have your back.
- This might sound weird, but I am wondering if you are okay.
- I have not heard you laugh in a while. Is everything okay?
- You OK? I noticed that you seem quiet in class.
- This sucks, but what sucks more : Options 1 or Option 2
- I promise this is not forever, it's just a part of your journey right now.
- Who's your person that makes you feel better?
- What makes you feel better when you have felt like this in the past?
- What have you tried so far to feel better?
- I have missed hanging out with you. How are you doing?
- Tell me if I am getting in the way, but are there any ways that I can support you?
- I have some ideas that might work for you. Is it okay if I share them?