



Opening Up About Mental Health

Talking about mental health helps reduce the lingering stigma and improve our communities. It makes it easier for us to talk about how we are coping, identify our willingness and readiness to seek help, and also learn to manage life's challenges. It is normal for us to experience anger, stress, sadness, and frustration in different situations and how we cope with these situations can make the difference in how we respond to those feelings. Talking about our feelings also helps maintain our mental health and allows us to better deal with any uncomfortable stressors.

► Talking to Kids and Youth

When speaking to children it is important to use language that is easy for them to understand, for example:

- Everyone has problems, both big and small. It is important to understand how your thoughts, feelings and actions are connected so you can better solve your problems.
- Thoughts are words that run through your mind.
- Our thoughts are powerful, and they can affect how we feel and what we do.
- Feelings change as different things happen to us.
- Emotions make us want to act, and different emotions guide us to act differently.
- Some feelings are uncomfortable, but they are not bad.
- Sometimes, our behaviors and actions can be helpful or hurtful to ourselves and others.
- Stress is a normal part of life. If you feel overwhelmed and feel like your stress is bossing you around, there are things you can do to boss it back.

It is important to be simple, direct, honest and calm when talking about mental health with any age group.

Prepare for the conversation:

Preschool to Kindergarten: Ages 4 to 6

- Parents of young children should help them identify feelings.
- Children learn emotions like they learn colours or shapes. If parents teach them the words for 30 different feelings, they learn nuances.
- Avoid telling children how they should or should not feel, no matter how tempting it is.
- Parents can also help their preschool and kindergarten children with coping mechanisms for handling tough feelings. Does crying help? What about hugging mom or dad? Will drawing help?

Grade School: Ages 7 to 10

- It is important to ask about feelings and forget about labels such as depression or anxiety.
- Ask in terms of "emotions."
- If children struggle to explain how they are feeling, parents/trusted adults can ask them to tell a story. That way they feel it is safe to open up.

Middle School: Ages 11 to 14

- These students often lack self-confidence and need reassurance.
- By now children have heard of mental health conditions and labels.
- Explore and ask what they know about them.

High School Students Ages 14+

- Educate yourself.
 - Learn how to recognize whether the teen is struggling as the first step.
 - There are many red flags that highlight specific issues such as, though not limited to:
 - Intense and uncontrollable emotions
 - Changes in behaviour
 - Sudden and unexplained weight loss/weight gain
 - Alcohol/substance abuse
 - Severe mood changes
 - Self-harm



- Open the conversation.
 - It is important to avoid creating a special moment for the talk.
 - Pursue a discussion in a moment when you and the teen naturally spend time together.
 - If the teen seems willing to engage with you, proceed with caution.
 - The important thing is to allow them to feel safe and show them that you are ready to help.
 - The longer you wait, the more likely the teen will isolate themselves.
- Be supportive.
 - It is essential to have the right attitude.
 - Do your best to listen and understand the problem from their point of view. This can be hard, especially when your instincts may be pushing you to intervene, but you must stay calm.
 - Your task is to act as a mediator and encourage them to seek professional help. It is important to avoid giving in to the temptation to organize their life.

► Conversation Starters

Starting a conversation can be difficult, especially if you are worried about the child. It doesn't matter how you start the conversation; it is about the opportunity it gives both of you to talk about feelings and to provide comfort.

Reassure them that if they don't want to talk now, they can talk to you at any time. Boost the child's confidence by showing them respect. Help them by giving them resources they are comfortable using so they can help themselves. You can also use an "encourager" to ignite the conversation.

Examples of conversation starters:

General:

- How are you feeling?
- What do you want to talk about?
- What was the best and worst part of your day?
- If you could start today again, what would you do differently?
- What did you do today that you are most proud of?

Serious:

- What was the biggest problem you had today?
- Do you want to talk about what is going on?
- How can I support you through [issue]?
- Is there anything that you need from me? Space, time to talk, time to do something fun...?

Encouragers:

- I love you, nothing can ever change that
- You can talk to me, I'm here for you
- If you need to talk to someone else, that's okay too
- If you talk to me about what is worrying you, I can do my best to help
- Even if I don't understand, know that I want to
- We're going to get through this together

► Understanding your own mental health

Part of talking about mental health means being honest and transparent about how you maintain your own mental health. Children learn behaviors from watching their parents and the adults around them. So, when you think about a child's mental well-being, think about your own as well. We lead by example. Don't assume they are not paying attention and noticing how you act.

Coping is a very important human behavior, one that is necessary for successfully tolerating, minimizing, and dealing with stressful life obstacles. What you exhibit as coping strategies and self-care is going to be the first and leading example for your children and youth to use as they develop their own coping toolboxes.

No situation is permanent and mastering the skill of challenging our own internal dialogue and ways of coping will pay off when it comes to maintaining a more balanced state of wellbeing. It may be time to play hardball!

You are not alone!

We are in control of our thoughts and our feelings; they do not control us. However, sometimes life's challenges increase our stress and anxiety levels and make it difficult for us to effectively cope and see that no situation is forever. Our coping skills help us process and deal with life stressors, struggles and emotions and help us balance our overall mental health. We must not be afraid to seek help in learning how to add more skills to our coping toolbox or get rid of some of those unhealthy coping skills that may cause our troubles to escalate.