Checking in on Mental Health:
How to talk about it

Spectrum Health

Talking about how you're feeling, especially when it comes to your mental health, can be difficult. A recent poll revealed that 31% of respondents have worried about being judged by friends and family for seeking mental health support. Our goal is to change the stigma and reduce that worry—because mental health is health. And everyone deserves support.

How can you reach out for help, or check in with someone you are worried about?

Use these tips and conversation starters to support friends and family, or to start talking to your friends or provider.

How to support a friend or family member who needs help

If you think someone close to you is experiencing stress, depression, anxiety, addiction or suicidal thoughts, reaching out can make all the difference. They may be embarrassed, afraid or not know how to seek help. Offering your support sends a powerful message that they're not alone.

Here are some phrases to get the conversation going:

- How are you? Really?
- "I've noticed that you haven't seemed like yourself lately. Is there anything you want to talk about?"
- "I'm worried about you; it seems like you're having a tough time. How can I help?"
- "It seems like you are going through a lot right now. Can we talk about it?"
- "Would you be open to talking to a doctor or counselor about what you're going through? I can help you find those resources. You're not alone."

It can also be easy to invalidate someone's mental health experience, intentionally or unintentionally. Here are some phrases to avoid:

- **"I know exactly how you feel."** It's impossible to know exactly how the other person feels. This phrase can also turn the conversation back to your experience, causing the other person to shut down or feel like their story has been minimized.
- **"You have no reason to be depressed" / "It will pass" / "Just…don't feel that way."** Depression, anxiety and similar disorders are usually rooted in a situational trigger or chemical imbalance in the brain. Telling someone that their life is great or that they should look on the bright side will not improve their situation.

If you're not sure what to say, that is okay too. It's better just to empathize with the person and acknowledge their hurt rather than using a platitude to fill the space.

Offer concrete solutions

Often when you ask someone how you can help, they may not know how to respond in the moment or feel comfortable responding. Here are some direct questions you can ask:

- Can I bring you dinner?
- Would you like it if I came over?
- Can I make an appointment for you?
- Can I drive you to your appointment?

If you are specifically worried that someone may be suicidal, these questions can help you figure out how serious the situation is:

- Have you thought about hurting yourself? Are you currently hurting yourself?
- Have you thought about dying?
- Do you think your friends and family would be better off without you?
- Do you have a plan for dying and a means to carry out that plan?

> If you are having this conversation with someone, do not leave them alone. Seek help immediately. Call 911 or the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline, 800.273.8255.

How to reach out to a friend for help

When you're in the midst of depression and anxiety, it can be hard to take that first step and reach out for help. You may worry that you won't be taken seriously, or that you will be judged; perhaps you feel like you're imposing. But your friends want to help. If you have depression, anxiety or a similar mental health experience or situational stressor, these tips might help you start the conversation.

Start anywhere

You don't have to immediately dive into the most challenging or worrisome aspects of your feelings and experiences. You likely won't cover everything you may wish to disclose in a first conversation. By opening up and relaying any aspect of your story, you've begun healing by forming a support network. You may want to start with, "Hey—can I talk to you? I haven't been feeling well lately, and I'm worried."

Talk to someone less close to home

You might not be ready to disclose your feelings to someone as close to you as your partner, best friend, parent or sibling. Sometimes starting with someone a little less close to home—literally and figuratively—like a friend, cousin or colleague, even a trusted coach, teacher or faith leader, can be an easier first step. You may want to start with, "I really trust you. Can I talk to you about how I've been feeling lately?"

Write your feelings down

It may feel easier to start sharing if you write down your feelings first. You may choose to do so as a letter to yourself or a letter to the person you wish to share with. It might be a list of symptoms or anything else that would help you to describe your condition. You may give this letter to someone, or read it to the person you wish to share with. You may want to start with, "I'd like to read you this letter I wrote about my feelings and worries. Can I read it to you uninterrupted and then talk about it with you?"

Express your feelings in other ways

If it feels difficult to find words, in writing or aloud, consider using images—those you paint or draw, or others' art that reflects your mood. You could use this art as a talking point when reaching out for help. You may want to start with, "I have a hard time describing my feelings, but I've drawn what they feel like. Can I show you?"

How to support a child who needs help

Children are less likely to have the capacity to verbalize their feelings. Talking to your child early and often about mental health is a great first step—this may just be showing up as a safe space for processing negative or confusing emotions. During conversations about mental health, consider these tips for equipping your children with the ability to express themselves.

Start with open-ended questions to move the conversation along, but be specific.

"How are you feeling" will likely result in answers like, "I don't know," "fine," "sad," "angry," "weird," or even, "why?"
You might instead ask about specific topics, issues or feelings that you know your child has been worried about or has been having:

- "How was school today? I know math has felt hard."
- "How are your friends doing? Who have you been playing with?"
- "What has recess been like?"

Share your observations

Don't be afraid to ask direct questions, especially if you are concerned that they might consider hurting themselves or others, or be suicidal.

- "I've noticed that you seem sad today, did anything happen?"
- "I'm worried about you. How can I help?"
- "Are you considering harming yourself?"

Give them the words

Young children might benefit from reading a book with you about mental health or big feelings. You can help children identify with the book characters with questions like, "Are you feeling like the character in this book?" and "Suzy said she was sad – do you know what it means to be sad?" Put words to feelings. It's okay to offer children multiple choice options for their emotions or use face charts to help them identify their emotions by looking at others' facial expressions.

Book recommendations

The Boy with Big, Big Feelings by Britney Winn Lee

A Little Spot of Feelings box set by Diane Alber

My Body Sends a Signal: Helping Kids Recognize Emotions and Express Feelings by Natalia Maguire

B is for Breathe: The ABCs of Coping with Fussy and Frustrating Feelings by Melissa Boyd

The Color Monster: A Story About Emotions by Anna Llenas

Show empathy

It can be easy to become frustrated by a tantrum over the blue versus yellow cup, but validating emotions, big and small, at an early age and in an ongoing manner will develop trust. Mental health symptoms can show up as emotional and physical pain—children need to know their symptoms will be trusted.

How to support a teen that needs help

According to the World Health Organization, globally one in seven 10- to 19-year-olds experiences a mental health disorder. This is partially caused by sudden hormonal shifts that accompany puberty and adolescence, as well as increased social pressures and burdens. For example, many teens cope with bullying—in person and through social media—sports-related pressure, relationships, body image issues and eating disorders and increased risk-taking sexually and with drugs or alcohol.

So how can you best support your teen?

Share your observations in a non-judgmental manner:

- You don't seem to be hanging out or talking to your friends as much as usual—what is different?
- I've noticed that your school work seems to be suffering. Are you having trouble with a specific subject or teacher, or is there something bigger going on? How can I help?
- You seem to have lost interest in hobbies/sports/friends/school that you used to love—are you feeling depressed?

Stay centered on your teen rather than your personal feelings about the situation. No matter what is occurring—be it depression or risk-taking behavior—the teen in front of you who needs helps is still your child, and how you react can be the difference in how their recovery unfolds. When you approach your teen:

- Respond with love and practice patience—Resorting to kindness over anger, and leaving room for silence so your teen can process their thoughts can make all the difference in a tough conversation.
- Switch up the setting—Where you choose to have a conversation about mental health or substance use could make you or your teen more comfortable. You could take your teen to dinner or approach the topic while driving or walking the dog together. Sometimes talking during an activity that requires little eye contact can make the conversation more comfortable. Figure out what works best for everyone.
- Based on the information you learn, calmly determine what the best next steps are for your teen—Continuing to monitor the situation and periodically check in; making an appointment with a primary care provider; seeking support for drug or alcohol use; etc. There is no one-size-fits-all solution.
- Remember that you are not alone, and convey the same message to your teen—you're in this together.

How to start a conversation with your primary care provider

Fearing social stigma, or simply not knowing what questions to ask, can be a barrier to seeking help. Making an appointment with your provider is an important first step toward feeling better. Before you arrive, consider the following tips to get the most out of your appointment.

Write down what you'd like to talk about

This will help you make sure you don't forget anything when you're in the office. Some things you can note ahead of time include:

- Your symptoms—These could be physical, mental, emotional or behavioral changes that you've noticed in your life.
- How your mood affects your everyday life, or how your everyday life affects your mood.
- If this is a new provider, be prepared with your medical information including other physical or mental conditions and medicine you are taking, including over-the-counter medicine and herbal supplements.
- Consider jotting down recent life changes, big and small, and whether you believe these have contributed to your changed mental state.

Have a list of questions ready

These may include:

- What steps do you typically take in identifying and/or diagnosing mental health disorders? Do I need a referral to a mental health specialist?
- How do you typically treat depression / anxiety / PTSD / other? Is medication involved and, if so, how long will it take to notice a change? What are common side effects?
- How long or how many appointments will it take to figure out a plan of action or obtain a diagnosis if relevant?
- What is your previous experience with my mental health situation or diagnosis?
- Would I benefit from mental health counseling and can you recommend a resource to me?
- Does insurance typically cover this appointment / medication / diagnosis process?
- Do you have any brochures or other printed material on my condition that I can take home with me?
- Is there anything I can try at home such as self-help tips or lifestyle changes?

Spectrum Health

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