

Conversation Guide: Talking to someone about mental health

Spotting the signs of poor mental health - notice the changes

Mental
Health
UK

Physical symptoms

- Headaches
- Muscle tension/ back ache
- Tight jaw/ grinding teeth
- Raised heart rate/ faster breathing
- Changes in appetite
- Stomach problems
- Difficulty sleeping

Behavioural symptoms

- Avoiding and blaming others
- Eating more, eating less or comfort eating
- Using alcohol, substances or smoking
- Snapping at others
- Becoming more accident prone
- Biting nails
- Self-harm

Emotional symptoms

- Irritable
- Frightened
- Worried/anxious
- Angry
- Feeling overwhelmed
- Fear
- Shame



Cognitive symptoms

- Worrying about the past or future
- Racing thoughts
- Panic attacks
- Problems concentrating
- Memory lapses/ forgetting things
- Difficulty making decisions
- Unable to think clearly

Dos and don'ts to having a supportive conversation

Do choose the right environment

Consider who else is around and can potentially overhear the conversation – if on the phone or online, could you use headphones to allow for greater privacy? Ask them: where would you like to talk?

Do give your full attention and listen without judgement

Offer reassurance that you are there to listen.

Try not to multitask, it's important to convey that you are dedicating your full attention to the conversation.

Do ask open questions

Ask them "How are you today?" or "I've noticed you haven't seemed yourself lately, how are you feeling?" – Sometimes making it about the present can prevent the ubiquitous "I'm fine" response.

Don't assume you know the answers

You're not expected to be an expert. If you don't know what to say, remember that you don't need to find an answer, or even understand their feelings. Listening will let them know you care.

Don't challenge, ignore or invalidate

Don't silver-line situations or try to make the person feel better. If someone says they feel worthless and we respond,

"No you're not, don't be silly" we are invalidating what they have said.

Don't compare

Sometimes we can draw up a story comparing their situation to someone else's or your own. In some instances, this can show empathy, but it can also sometimes turn into you telling your story rather than listening to them.

Do reflect back and clarify

If someone says something that isn't clear and you don't know what they meant, repeat back what they have said and ask them to explain. Don't put words in their mouth.

Do show empathy rather than sympathy

Empathic responses show that you're trying to see where the person

is coming from. Sympathy usually expresses pity, so say something like "That must be awful, I'm so sorry." Instead of "I'm sorry for you"

Do empower the person

Ask: "What do you think would help?" rather than tell them what you think would help. Give information rather than advice. This makes it empowering.

Don't try to find an easy solution

What would help someone or what they want to happen will be different for everyone so don't try to 'fix' or give advice as your first response.

Don't diagnose

You are not in a position to diagnose a mental illness. This is not your role, even if you've gone through something similar yourself.



Signposting

Learn more about mental health conditions



SCAN ME

As a first point of call, GPs are the main gateway to further support. Let them know that they can book a double appointment with their GP to discuss their mental health, so they don't feel rushed. They can request for a family member or friend to attend the appointment with them.

Find out more



SCAN ME

You could suggest our online community Clic. It's monitored 24/7, so it's a great way for people to connect with others and get peer support.

Join Clic for free



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To find support in your local area, or if you or someone is experiencing a crisis, visit www.mentalhealth-uk.org/support-and-services/



Find support



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