

STARTING A CONVERSATION ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH

Mental health and wellbeing is vital to us all but it can sometimes be hard to start those conversations.

But conversations about mental health don't need to be hard - it could be as simple as asking someone how their day is going.

Contacting someone can have a huge impact on how they are feeling.

That might include some of the following ideas:

- texting a friend
- checking up on a loved one
- asking someone how they're doing
- hosting a coffee morning
- sharing your 'small wins' with others

What to do if you think someone is struggling with their mental health

Many people worry that reaching out will be intrusive or make things worse. You'll soon be able to tell if the person you're speaking to isn't comfortable or doesn't want to have that kind of conversation. If they don't want to open, you'll still have let them know you're there for them.

Once someone starts to share how they're feeling, it's important to **listen**.

1. This could mean not offering advice,
2. not trying to identify what they're going through with your own experiences.
3. not trying to solve their problems.

Here are a few tips on how to start the conversation:

Show you care

- Focus on the other person, make eye contact, put away your phone.
- To really listen to somebody, you need to give them your full attention, maintain eye contact and be engaged.
- Getting into this habit takes practice so don't be too hard on yourself and keep using these handy tips
- When starting the conversation resolve not to talk about yourself at all.

Have Patience

- It may take time and several attempts before a person is ready to open up.
- Effective listening is about creating trust with the other person. The person sharing shouldn't feel rushed, or they won't feel it's a safe environment.

- If they've paused in their response, wait, they may not have finished speaking. It might take them some time to formulate what they are saying, or they may find it difficult to articulate what they're feeling.
- Through non-judgmental listening, you are allowing the person to relax into the conversation and to use it as a place to reflect or work through difficult emotions.

Use open questions

- Use open questions that need more than a yes/no answer and follow up with questions like 'Tell me more'.
- An open-ended question means not jumping in with your own ideas about how the other person may be feeling.
- These questions don't impose a viewpoint and require a person to pause, think and reflect, and then hopefully expand.
- Avoid asking questions or saying something that closes the conversation. Open-ended questions encourage them to talk, the conversation is a safe space that you are holding for them and nothing they say is right or wrong. Try asking, 'how are you feeling today'?

Say it back

Check you've understood, but don't interrupt or offer a solution.

- Repeating something back to somebody is a really good way to reassure them that they have your undivided attention.
- And you can check to see that you're hearing what they want you to hear, not putting your own interpretation onto the conversation.

Have courage!

- Don't be put off by a negative response and, most importantly, don't feel you have to fill a silence.
- Sometimes it can feel intrusive and counter-intuitive to ask someone how they feel. You'll soon be able to tell if someone is uncomfortable and doesn't want to engage with you at that level.
- You'll be surprised at how willing people are to listen and how, sometimes, it is exactly what somebody needs to be able to share what is going on their mind.

Support Networks and useful websites:

<https://www.mind.org.uk/>

<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/>

<https://www.samaritans.org/how-we-can-help/contact-samaritan/>

<https://www.time-to-change.org.uk/>

