

BACK TO SCHOOL

TIME TO TALK: UNCOMFORTABLE, BUT IMPORTANT!

A GUIDE FOR ADOLESCENTS AND TEENS



It's time to talk about your mental health when:

- You just don't "feel right" and aren't sure why.
- Your thoughts or things you do just don't seem the way other people think or behave.
- Your thoughts, feelings or behaviors are starting to affect your life at home, school or with friends in a bad way.
- You've had some of the signs and symptoms below for more than a few weeks:



Feeling sad, empty, hopeless or worthless



Sensitivity to sound, sight, smell or touch



Feeling overly worried



Not being able to do school work



Feeling like your brain is playing tricks on you and hearing knocking or scratching sounds, or your name being called



Loss of interest in things you used to enjoy, or withdrawal from others



Changes in sleep patterns or energy levels



Irritability or restlessness



Problems with concentration, memory or thinking



Loss of appetite or overeating

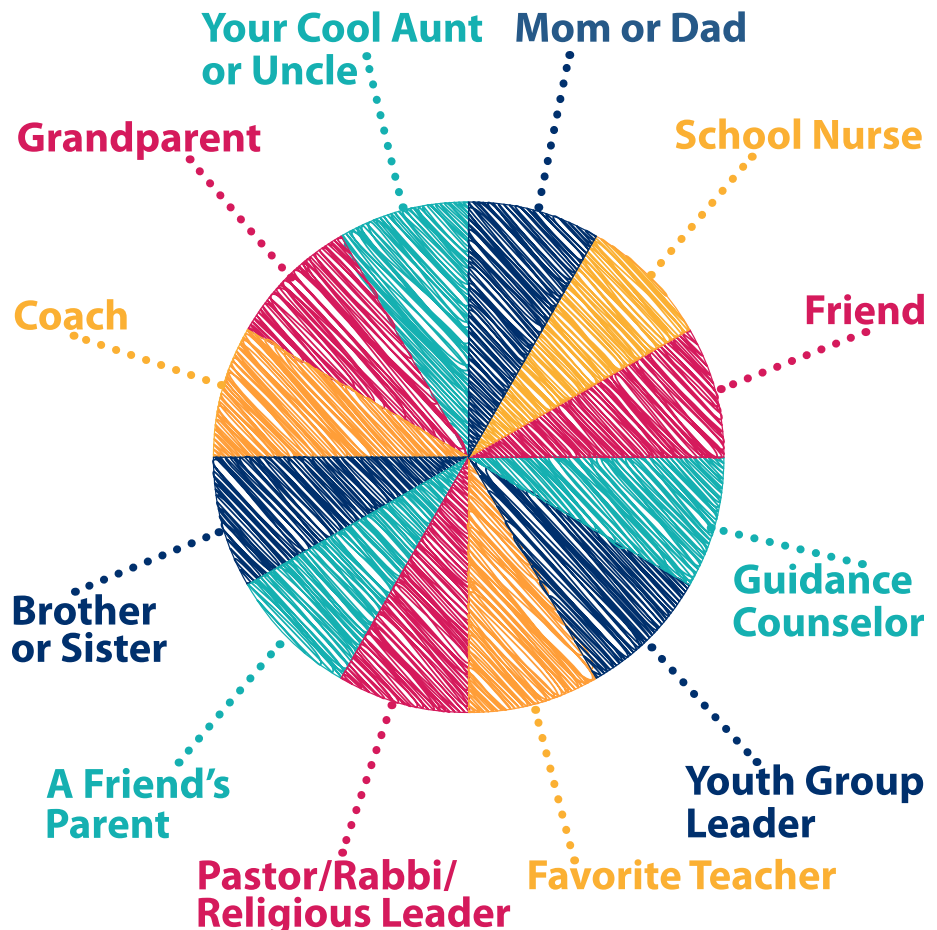
Signs and symptoms that you shouldn't ignore:

- Thoughts or plans of killing or hurting one's self or another person
- Hearing voices or seeing things that no one else can hear or see
- Unexplainable changes in thinking, speech, or writing
- Being overly suspicious or fearful
- Serious drop in school performance
- Sudden personality changes that are bizarre or out of character

If you or someone you know is in crisis, call 1-800-273-TALK (8255), text 741741, go to your local Emergency Room or call 911.

WHO CAN YOU TALK TO?

Find a person that you trust. Someone who will listen to you, and help you plan your next steps.



TIPS FOR TALKING

Start a conversation about mental health when there is an open window of time to have an in-depth discussion, and neither you or the person you're talking to will have to cut the conversation short to take care of other obligations. Plan to set aside **at least 30 minutes to an hour.**

Not sure how to bring up the topic of your mental health?

Here are a few ways to get started:



Start with a text if a face-to-face talk is too intimidating. It could be a plain old text message with a note that says, "I have some important things on my mind and need to make time to talk to you about them."



Find & share info. Find important information online that might help you explain what you're going through. Print it and bring it with you when you're ready to talk.



Take the Youth Screen at mhascreening.org. Print out your results to share with the person you plan to talk to.

STILL STUMPED ABOUT HOW TO GET STARTED?

Use the letter below and fill in the blanks. Pick from the options we've listed or use your own words.

Dear _____,

For the past (*day/week/month/year/*_____), I have been feeling (*unlike myself/sad/angry/anxious/moody/agitated/lonely/hopeless/fearful/overwhelmed/distracted/confused/stressed/empty/restless/unable to function or get out of bed/*_____).

I have struggled with (*changes in appetite/changes in weight/loss of interest in things I used to enjoy/hearing things that were not there/seeing things that were not there/feeling unsure if things are real or not real/my brain playing tricks on me/lack of energy/increased energy/inability to concentrate/alcohol or drug use or abuse/self-harm/skipping meals/overeating/overwhelming focus on weight or appearance/feeling worthless/uncontrollable thoughts/guilt/paranoia/nightmares/bullying/not sleeping enough/sleeping too much/risky sexual behavior/overwhelming sadness/losing friends/unhealthy friendships/unexplained anger or rage/isolation/feeling detached from my body/feeling out of control/thoughts of self-harm/cutting/thoughts of suicide/plans of suicide/abuse/sexual assault/death of a loved one/*_____).

Telling you this makes me feel (*nervous/anxious/hopeful/embarrassed/empowered/pro-active/mature/self-conscious/guilty/*_____), but I'm telling you this because (*I'm worried about myself/it is impacting my schoolwork/it is impacting my friendships/I am afraid/I don't want to feel like this/I don't know what to do/I don't have anyone else to talk to about this/I trust you/*_____).

I would like to (*talk to a doctor or therapist/talk to a guidance counselor/talk to my teachers/talk about this later/create a plan to get better/talk about this more/find a support group/*_____) and I need your help.

Sincerely,
(Your name _____)

WHAT IF SOMEONE TALKS TO YOU ABOUT THEIR MENTAL HEALTH?



LISTEN.

Let them finish their sentences and complete thoughts without interrupting. After they have finished you can respond.



LET THEM KNOW IF YOU UNDERSTAND.

If someone has just spilled their guts and you've gone through something similar—tell them. It helps a lot for someone to know they aren't alone. Make sure you don't switch the topic of conversation to your struggles though; focus on their needs.

AVOID BEING JUDGMENTAL.

Don't tell them they are being weird or crazy; it's not helpful at all.

TAKE THEM SERIOUSLY.

Try not to respond with statements that minimize how they are feeling or what they are going through, such as, "You're just having a bad week," or "I'm sure it's nothing."

MAKE YOURSELF AVAILABLE TO TALK TO AGAIN IF NEEDED.

While it can be a big relief for someone to share something they have been keeping secret, mental health struggles usually aren't solved with one conversation. Let the person who has spoken with you know that they can reach out to you again if they are having a tough time.

It's ok to let them know if there is a time of day or certain days of the week that you aren't available. For instance, "I'm here for you if you need to talk, but my parents don't let me use the phone after 9 on school nights, so call before then."

DON'T TURN WHAT YOU'VE BEEN TOLD INTO GOSSIP.

If someone is talking to you about their mental health, it was probably tough for them to work up the nerve to say something in the first place and you shouldn't share what they tell you with other students at school. Let them share on their own terms.



IF YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND, DO SOME RESEARCH AND LEARN ABOUT WHAT YOU'VE BEEN TOLD.

Make sure that your information is coming from reliable sources like government agencies and health organizations.



TELL AN ADULT IF YOU HAVE TO.

It's important to have friends that trust you, but if a friend indicates they have thoughts or plans of hurting themselves or another person, have been hearing voices or seeing things that no one else can hear or see, or have any other signs and symptoms that shouldn't be ignored (see page 1) then you need to tell an adult what is going on. That doesn't make you a bad friend; it just means that the problem requires more help than you can give.

If someone you know is in crisis and needs help urgently, call 1-800-273-TALK (8255), text 741741, go to your local Emergency Room or call 911.

NOW WHAT?

If you've made the decision to talk to someone about your mental health, you may be nervous about how things will go and what could happen. Check out the list below to find out more about what you can expect.

Things might be a little awkward at first for both people in the conversation.

For a lot of people, talking about anything related to their health or body can be kind of tough at first.

You'll probably feel relieved.

Being able to open up and share something you've been keeping to yourself for a long time can feel like a weight has been lifted. You might learn that the person you're talking to has had some personal experience or knows someone in their family who has gone through something similar, which will help you to feel less alone.

You may encounter someone who doesn't understand.

While it's likely that a person will know someone who has struggled with their mental health, they may not understand what it's like—especially if they haven't struggled themselves.

Expect to be asked questions.

Some questions might include: How long has this been going on? Did something difficult happen before you started feeling this way? Can you describe what it's like? You don't have to answer every question that you're asked if you don't want. Remember that the person you're talking to is probably asking questions to help them better understand what you're going through.

It's possible that you might not get the reaction you were hoping for.

It can be discouraging if you work up the nerve to speak up and are then told, "you've just got the blues" "get over it" "stop being silly" or "you worry too much." Sometimes this kind of reaction has to do with culture or expectations. Try to explain how it is really having an effect on your ability to live a healthy and happy life and you aren't sure how to make things better. If for some reason the person you chose to talk to still isn't "getting it" someone else will. Think about someone else you could talk to that would give you the help you need. Don't stop or go back to ignoring your situation or struggling alone.

The conversation is the first step in a process.

Congratulations for getting the ball rolling.

If your first conversation isn't with your parents, you'll probably need to talk to them at some point.

See the following page for tips and common concerns about talking to parents.

Your next step might be going to an appointment of some sort.

It may start with someone at school like the guidance counselor or school psychologist, a visit to your regular family doctor or psychiatrist, or with another kind of treatment provider like a therapist or social worker. These professionals can help figure out what exactly is going on and how to start getting you the help you need. You might need to talk to more than one person to find someone who can be the most helpful.

It takes time to get better.

You could be going through something situational, which can improve with time to process feelings (for example, grief after the death of a loved one or a tough break-up) or adjustments to your environment (like switching lockers to get away from someone who is a bully), or you could have a more long term mental health issue. Mental health issues are common and treatable; however, you may have to try a few different things to find right type of treatment or combination of strategies that works best for you.



Talking to a parent about mental health can be scary for a number of reasons.

Many people report being afraid to tell their parents because they do not want to upset them. Sometimes we don't understand where troubling feelings or thoughts are coming from and feel guilty for having them. A good question to ask yourself in this situation is how would you feel if someone you love were suffering and came to you? Likely, you would be upset that they were struggling, but you would not be upset with them. You would be glad they confided in you and ready to help them in any way you could.

Here are some of the most common concerns people give for not talking to their parents and some tips for overcoming them.

I don't know how my parents will react.

Talking can be scary, but the help available is worth it. The sooner you address things, the sooner you can feel better and the better you will be in the long-run. If you are concerned about how your parents will respond, one option is to schedule a meeting with both of them or with one parent at a time. Instead of a sudden, potentially unexpected conversation, choose a time and place where you are comfortable and plan what you want to say beforehand. You can plan by researching information online, taking a mental health screening and printing the results, or just by writing out a script for what you'd like to say.

On that note, you could also write a letter if you are not as comfortable with a conversation. A letter allows you to express exactly what you want to say without the pressure of an immediate response. Check out our sample letter on page 2. Remember, even if it seems scary or if your family never discusses these things, you are doing what is right for you. Be honest with where you are and think about the specific support you need from them. Focus on actions they can take or things they can change.

My parents will be sad or disappointed.

It might be hard for your parents not to show that they are sad, upset or disappointed. They might be sad that you are suffering, but this does not mean they are upset with you. In fact, many parents are upset because the care about you. Parents often wonder if there was something they could have done differently that would have prevented you from struggling.

Maybe you feel that there are high expectations of you and you're afraid that having mental health problems will be a disappointment. It's important to ask where these expectations come from and whether the expectations are real (have you been told certain things are expected, or are you assuming they are expected) or reasonable. Thinking through and explaining your fears about their sadness or disappointment might help them to respond in a way that is more helpful for you.

My parents will be angry or won't take me seriously.

Another concern many people have is that their parents will become angry or dismiss their feelings, both of which are painful experiences when you are already hurting. When dealing with a potential conflict, it is helpful to plan a meeting or to write a letter saying that you are worried about anger or dismissal. Explain to your parents that you are struggling and believe you would benefit from extra support. If they dismiss your concerns, tell them that you are trying to take care of yourself and would like to at least have a discussion with a professional. You can also support your desire for treatment with information and mental health screening results.

A lot of the time, reacting with anger or dismissal is about fear. Your parents might not know how to react or may have preconceived notions about what it means to get help for mental health concerns. Even if they do not know the best way to respond, it is important that you speak up for yourself, as we know the earlier a person gets help the better they are in the long-run. You may have to turn to other trusted adults or mental health resources if needed.

My parents will ask too many questions.

Sometimes parents will get upset and afraid and want to know all of the details of what you are experiencing. While only you know your parents and level of comfort, do not feel that you have to share every detail of your experience. You may be unsure of how to describe what you're feeling or afraid of getting in trouble for certain behaviors. Your thoughts or concerns about how your family relates to one another might also be playing a role in what you're going through. There are reasons why you may not want to tell your parents every single detail of what is going on, and it makes sense to want some privacy when first opening up about your struggles.

It might help to plan or review what you are comfortable sharing beforehand. You can tell your parents that you would really like to speak to a mental health professional, as an outside input with knowledge and experience in what you are dealing with. While it is unhealthy to hold things in, it is important to make sure you are in a safe space when beginning to open up.

My parents already have enough to worry about.

All adults have responsibilities and stress. While some families may be dealing with more stressful or serious situations than others, your wellbeing and health is important and deserves attention—regardless of what else may be going on with your parents. If you're worried about stressing out your parents, pick a time to talk when things are calm, and bring information about what you're going through and what kind of help you would like.

One or both of my parents are part of why I am struggling.

If one or both of your parents contribute to your desire to seek help, there are several options for what you can do. If you trust one parent, you can explain how you are feeling and ask that they either tell or do not tell the other parent. Often parents may not be willing to keep things of this nature from one another so make sure to check beforehand.

This might be an opportunity to reach out to another trusted adult in your life. Guidance counselors in particular can be very helpful in these situations, as they have experience and expertise with students in similar situations. Other trusted adults may be able to help you as well, particularly in creating a plan to talk to your parents. While speaking with a trusted adult is not a substitute for a needed treatment program, outside resources can guide you to the help or support you need.

If you are currently experiencing physical abuse, sexual abuse, or neglect, inform a trusted adult. You can visit www.dorightbykids.org to find out more information on definitions of abuse and neglect, reporting, and what happens after you report.

My parents do not believe me.

Even if your parents care for you, sometimes it's hard for them to see what is actually going on. This could mean they label your struggles as typical "growing up" experiences, or they dismiss the entire possibility of getting help for mental health. Ignoring problems because they are unpleasant does not make them go away, and it is important for you to continue to ask for what you need. You can explain to them that, even though you hear their beliefs, you would like the chance to speak to a mental health professional based on your experiences and research.

If it is unlikely that you will change their minds, you may have to reach out to other resources. This includes teachers, relatives, and guidance counselors. These individuals could help you talk to your parents and/or put you in contact with resources to help. Even though your parents are not validating your struggles, it does not make them unreal or unimportant. If you need professional help, put together a list of reasons why this is the help you think you need. You can also lean on friends, online communities, and other accessible mental health resources like apps and online education.

For more information and resources in your area contact your local MHA affiliate. Find one near you at mentalhealthamerica.net/find-affiliate

Take the Youth Screen



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