

CONVERSATION STARTERS



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MOLLY

HOW TO HAVE CONVERSATIONS AROUND MENTAL HEALTH

Starting a conversation can be tricky, especially if you are worried that someone is having a tough time. It does not matter what topic the conversation starts with – it is about the opportunity it gives you both to talk about feelings and to provide comfort.

Starting a conversation is a powerful way to challenge mental health stigma and help people to think about their own perceptions and the perceptions of others. You do not need to be mental health experts to talk about mental health and challenge the stigma surrounding it.

Positive conversations may lead to talking to someone about their mental health, so it is important to manage the situation effectively, and that you know how to end these conversations and if appropriate signpost further sources of advice and support if required. The guidance below on managing conversations will help.

By opening a conversation you do not need to have the answers, but you do need to be prepared to show the person that you are listening. You will need to reassure and show that you care. You might need to signpost someone to getting further help.

You will also need to give yourself time to process what has happened and to look after yourself too.

MANAGING CONVERSATIONS

- Find a quiet place with an informal atmosphere, such as a café. A conversation about mental health should not feel like a formal interview.
- Actively listen to the person by giving them your undivided attention. Leave any questions or comments until the person has finished talking, so you do not interrupt them and stop them opening up.

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- Once someone knows they are being given the space and time to talk, they are more likely to start talking about their true feelings and be open about what is troubling them.
- Listening carefully so you can reflect the words they have been saying is likely to allow them to open up more.
- Use empathetic statements such as: “I appreciate this must be difficult for you...”.
- Avoid clichés, for example comments such as “It’s not that bad” “pull yourself together” or “you’re just having a bad day”, as these are unhelpful and may well just make the person feel worse and that it is their fault.
- Remind them that poor mental health is far more common than people think. 1 in 6 people report experiencing a common mental health problem (*like anxiety and depression*) in any given week in England [1]. It can affect anyone at any time and just like physical health can improve and decline and that acknowledging how you feel is a great step to starting a journey of recovery.
- Avoid asking too many questions, especially closed questions (*which require a ‘yes’ or ‘no’ answer*) and those that begin with the word ‘why.’ Ask open questions to invite a more detailed response:

1. Can you describe how you’re feeling?
2. How do you look after yourself?
3. What support do you have in place?

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- Reassure them that it is positive that they want to talk about their experience, and that they have acknowledged they want support (*if this is the case*). Point to the sources of further help available as shown on the coffee mat or on one of our MRF **“where to find help”** cards.

Note: If someone approaches you wanting to talk, it may not be possible for you to give them the time they need there and then. Instead, show them you recognise that they have taken a positive step by speaking to you, explain why you can't talk now and arrange a better time to have the conversation. If they are in urgent need of help, be sure to signpost them to support.

[1] Data source Mind website Oct 2023

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SOME EXAMPLES OF CONVERSATION STARTERS AND EXTENDERS

How are you feeling?

What was the best and worst bit of your day?

What do you want to talk about?

What was the biggest problem you had today?

If you could start today again, what would you do differently?

What did you do today that you are most proud of?

If you were an animal which one would you be?

If your life was a movie which one would it be?

What's your favourite song at the moment? Would I like it?

What made you feel happy today?

Where do you feel safe and calm?

What would your ideal day be like?

How are you feeling about...?

What colour/animal represents how you feel today?

Is there anything that you need from me?
Space, time to talk, time to do something fun...

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How can I support you through [issue]?

Do you want to talk about what's going on?

It's okay to ask for help and you can always ask me if you need any.

Is there anything that's on your mind when you're trying to go to sleep?

What difficult things are you going through at the moment?

AIMED AT YOUNG PEOPLE:

What was the biggest problem you had today?

What's your favourite thing about school and why?

If an alien had landed in your class today, what would you have been embarrassed for them to see?