



**How are you,
really?**

Talking with friends
and family about
their mental health



Spectrum Health
Foundation



Spectrum Health
Helen DeVos
children's hospital
Foundation



Talking about how we are feeling, especially when it comes to 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 at Spectrum Health is to change the stigma and reduce that worry—because mental health is health. And everyone deserves support.

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

Use these tips and conversation starters to support friends and family, or to care for yourself.



Talking to a friend

If you think someone close to you is experiencing depression, stress, anxiety, addiction or suicidal thoughts, reaching out can make all the difference.

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?”

“It seems like you are going through a lot right now. Can we talk about it?”

Avoid such invalidating statements as:

“I know exactly how you feel.”

“You have no reason to be depressed.”

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 use 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 drive you to your appointment?”

Talking to your teen

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. 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’s up?”

“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

Do your best to reserve your personal feelings about the situation in order to focus on your teen. How you react can be the difference in how their recovery unfolds.

When you approach your teen:

- Let your teen know that he or she is not alone.
- Respond with love and practice patience, leaving room for silence to allow your teen to process their thoughts.
- Determine what the best next steps are for your teen: monitor and check in, make an appointment with a provider, seek support for substance abuse, etc.

Talking to your child

Children are less likely to be able to verbalize their feelings. During conversations about mental health, consider these tips for equipping your children with the ability to express themselves.

Closed-ended questions such as “How are you feeling” will likely result in answers like, “I don’t know,” “fine,” “mad,” “weird,” or even, “why?” Open-ended, but specific, questions can move the conversation along:

“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?”

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.

Share your observations

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

“I’ve noticed that you seem sad today. Did anything happen?”

“I’m worried about you. How can I help?”

Concerned about suicide?

If you are having a conversation with someone whom you fear may be suicidal, do not leave them alone. Seek help immediately. Call 911 or the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 800.273.8255.



Caring for yourself

When you're in the midst of depression and anxiety, it can be hard to take that first step and reach out for help. 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. By opening up and relaying any aspect of your story, you can begin to heal. "Hey—can I talk to you?"

Talk to someone less close to home

Instead of disclosing your feelings to a partner or parent, sometimes starting with someone a little less close to home—like a friend, cousin, colleague, or pastor—can be an easier first step. "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 give this letter to someone, or read it. "Can I read you this letter I wrote about my feelings and worries?"

Express your feelings in other ways

If it feels difficult to find *words* to say, consider using *images*—yours or others'—as a talking point when reaching out for help. "I have a hard time describing my feelings, but I've drawn what they feel like. Can I show you?"



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