



How to start a conversation about **MENTAL HEALTH**



batyr & The Happiness Institute
Parent/Carer guide

Who is this guide for?

This guide has been created for the batyr community; for all parents and carers who are looking to support young people with experiences of mental ill-health. We understand that it can be tough for parents and carers who want to support their young person but may not have the tools or the confidence to do so. This guide has been created by leading positive psychologist Dr. Tim Sharp AKA Dr. Happy from The Happiness Institute in collaboration with batyr.

How to start a conversation and talk about mental health safely

Difficult conversations are much easier to have when general conversations are frequent and common. If you want to be able to talk about the tough stuff, you have to regularly talk about the day to day, mundane stuff. If you rarely talk to your child about these everyday things and then try to raise something important, it could easily be awkward. On the other hand, if you've made a start on this or you're constantly in touch and the channels of communication are open and flowing, then the "real stuff" will be much easier.

So, how do you start a conversation about mental health? The short answer to this question is that it should be no different to having any other discussions. In an ideal world, talking about mental health should be just something we talk about openly. When our children are young, they get used to going to the GP for things like immunisations and just regular check-ups, or visiting the dentist to ensure their dental hygiene is on track. We should treat mental health in exactly the same way!

Of course, this is a work in progress and stigma surrounding mental health still exists which can make it daunting to talk about. There may well be times when it's difficult, but laying down the groundwork will help it not be overly complicated or uncomfortable in the future.



Where should I start?

Check in with our kids/young people on a regular basis asking how they're feeling and faring. We can ask simple questions at dinner like...

"What's going well?"

**and
even**

"What's not going well?"

"and what can you/we do about it"

Questions like these achieve a number of desirable goals. They...

- Encourage a focus on what's going well
- Introduce the practice of gratitude and appreciation
- Normalise discussion of what's not going well; but with a focus on problem solving and solution finding

Like many things in life, all this can be easier said than done. There's no doubt serious conversations (like those about mental health) can become more difficult at certain stages, especially during adolescence or if your child is experiencing mental ill-health.

A normal part of becoming or being a teenager is separating themselves from parents or carers.

Trying to understand who they are as an individual can mean distancing from family members. One of the more common symptoms of distress, especially depression, is social withdrawal. For all these reasons, even strong parent-child relationships can be tested at times. These are some of the reasons your child might not be ready or willing to have a conversation about their mental health. Or they might not be ready or willing at the same time you're ready and willing. This doesn't mean you shouldn't try; in fact, **you should always try, and you should keep trying.**

"I've realised that when I'm offering support, I must be patient, embrace the silence and not expect a response straight away. These things take time."

- John, Parent from
Marist Sisters College

Things to consider before you start the conversation:

MAKE SURE THE **TIMING** IS RIGHT

Choose a time when all involved are less likely to be stressed or upset, busy or distracted

MAKE SURE THE **SETTING** IS RIGHT

Choose a room or location where distractions are minimal and interruptions less likely. For some people it can be easier to go for a drive or a walk. The only thing that really matters is what works for both of you.

DON'T GET **DISTRACTED**

Leave your phone and any other distractions in another room or in your pocket. Your focus should be on your child and on the important conversation you're having NOT on news/social media/work

DON'T **RUSH**

Set aside enough time so that you don't have to rush and so your child/young person doesn't feel pressured to finish or resolve the conversation in a certain time. The conversation may take 5 or 10 minutes, but if it takes longer that should also be OK. Once you've set things up as best you can, check with your child what they actually want to get out of the conversation. Remember, what's important is what your child wants, not necessarily what you want.

Some questions to get things started then might be...

- Do you want me to just sit/be here with you?
- Would you like to talk and have me just listen?
- Can I try to help you come up with a solution or work out what you can do about this situation/issue that's upsetting you?
- Or is there something else that could help?

Regardless of the answer, or within any of these scenarios, the priority should ALWAYS be to listen as much as you can. There's a great principle that is incredibly useful in many situations, and especially so here, which is...

Seek first to understand; only then to be understood (or to help).

So, listen to your child and really hear what they're saying (and maybe even what they're not saying). If necessary, clarify anything you're unsure about, check you really understand by repeating back what you think they've said and asking if you are correct.

And then, depending (obviously) on what's come before and on what your current understanding of the situation is...

- **Don't be afraid to raise concerns empathetically**

There's a myth that talking about mental ill-health or even suicide might make things worse; but this is definitely a myth. Stigma grows and worsens in silence, whereas open conversations are far more likely to help.

- **Don't skirt around issues or worries**

Talk about what needs to be talked about and don't shy away. This can be made easier by focusing on specific behaviours you've noticed

Some general questions that can help with this are:

- I've noticed that you don't seem yourself lately, what's going on?
- You can be more specific by saying something like 'I've noticed that you haven't been going out lately OR that you've been skipping sport training OR you don't seem to be eating much OR you seem really tired all the time ... is there anything you'd like to talk about?'
- I have to say I'm a bit concerned about the way you've been speaking to me lately; would you like to talk to me about what is going on?
- What's happening for you at the moment?

Remember, the primary goal here is to start a conversation.

You might not (very possibly won't) solve everything or answer every question in one chat and that's okay. Just starting the conversation is a great achievement. By doing this you are conveying the message that you're here, you're available, you're willing and wanting to help.

Some young people might not open up or engage in conversation at all, and that's okay, the timing may be wrong for them and they may not be ready. In this situation, you have shown that the door is always open for them to talk and they may feel more comfortable reaching out when they're ready. Don't be afraid to try again when you feel the time is right, sometimes we need people to reach out to us a few times before we feel comfortable to open up. Once things get started, it becomes easier to keep talking. And once you're talking, it's much easier to find solutions and/or get the help that might be needed.



Getting help

Mental Health Line 1800 011 511

The NSW Mental Health Line is a 24-hour state-wide telephone number which puts you in touch with your local mental health service. Staffed by mental health professionals, the line gives NSW residents access to expert mental health advice, support and referrals for people dealing with a mental health problem and their families and carers.



Lifeline provides access to crisis support, suicide prevention and mental health services.

13 11 14
www.lifeline.org.au



Counselling services and support for carers, including peer support groups, online training and counselling.

1800 422 737
Carergateway.gov.au



Headspace is the national youth mental health foundation. It helps young people who are going through a tough time.

www.headspace.org.au



Kids Helpline is Australia's only free, private and confidential, phone counselling service specifically for young people aged between five and twenty-five.

1800 55 1800
www.kidshelpline.com.au



Dedicated to bringing about change to the culture, policy and practice in the prevention, treatment and support of those affected by eating disorders and negative body image.

thebutterflyfoundation.org.au



Beyond Blue is an organisation working to increase awareness and understanding of depression, anxiety and related substance-use issues around Australia.

www.beyondblue.org.au



The Black Dog Institute is a world leader in the diagnosis, treatment and prevention of mood disorders such as depression and bipolar.

www.blackdoginstitute.org.au



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