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WHAT TO DO IF YOU'RE CONCERNED ABOUT YOUR TEEN'S MENTAL HEALTH

A Conversation Guide



If you feel that your teen is in imminent danger, don't delay.

Some options in this scenario include:

- › Call 1-800-273-8255
- › Text START to 741741
- › Call 911
- › Go to the nearest emergency room immediately

INTRODUCTION

This guide is meant to help parents and families who are concerned about their teen's mental health and emotional well-being have important conversations with their child. Although parents often pick up on concerning signs that their teen is struggling, not everyone feels well-equipped to approach their child to have a conversation about how they are feeling. Knowing what to do after the conversation, especially if the child has expressed something concerning, is not always obvious.

This guide covers the following topics:

- Signs that your teen may be struggling
- Preparing yourself emotionally to have the conversation
- What to say and do during the conversation
- What to do if your teen denies a problem or refuses help but you are still concerned
- How to follow up after the conversation

Although having a conversation when you're concerned about your teen's mental health is important, this experience shouldn't be that different from regular check-ins you might have with your teen already. Try not to put too much pressure on this conversation and understand that this is a process and may take multiple conversations to discuss. It's normal to at some point have some concerns about your teenager's emotional well-being, so try not to become overly anxious about approaching this topic.

1.



WHEN TO HAVE THE CONVERSATION

How should parents know when to be concerned about their child’s mental health? You are the best judge of your child’s behaviors and needs. You should always trust your gut and check in with your teen if you are concerned. You know your child - if you notice a change in their behavior, it’s always a good time to check in.

Here are some signs that your child may be struggling:

- Significant changes in eating, sleeping, self-care, or socializing habits
- Signs of sadness and/or withdrawal from social situations, especially if they persist for a while
- Extreme mood swings or irritability
- Seeming much more fearful and/or avoiding certain environments, situations, or social interactions altogether (such as school avoidance)
- Using drugs or alcohol, especially changes in typical patterns of use
- Difficulty with or neglect of basic self-care, personal hygiene, etc.
- Getting in fights or suddenly not getting along with others
- Sudden increase in reckless, impulsive, out-of-control behaviors

You may notice other signs that signal something might be wrong. ***The most important tenets here are to know your child and trust your gut.*** Even if you think some of your child’s behavior may be ascribed to “normal teenage angst,” if you are concerned, you should always err on the side of caution, trust yourself, and talk to your child to find out what might be going on.

2.



PREPARING YOURSELF FOR THE CONVERSATION

You might think that the conversation you’re about to have with your teen is all about your teen. But you are an important part of the equation here and how you feel going into the conversation is important both for you and for the outcomes of the conversation. It’s okay to feel nervous, upset, or unprepared to have this conversation. In fact, it’s normal to

feel strong emotions when approaching these topics with your teen. Here are some ways you can prepare yourself for the conversation and manage the strong emotions you may be feeling.

ACKNOWLEDGE HOW YOU FEEL

You might be feeling upset, angry, nervous, or any combination of these. Acknowledge how you feel and understand that it is completely normal to have some negative emotions around this topic and the prospect of a conversation with your child about concerning behaviors. Give yourself a moment to acknowledge how you feel and activate your coping mechanisms. Consider talking to someone you trust about how you feel. While your priority is to make sure your child is okay, the conversation will be much more helpful if you are centered and calm.

CREATE A PLAN FOR THE CONVERSATION

Here are some ways you can prepare for the conversation:

- Write down any particular behaviors or comments that concern you. For example, if your teen seems withdrawn or particularly irritable or has made comments about not wanting to go to school lately.
- Make a list of what questions you'll ask your teen. For example, you might ask him or her about particular friendships, classes, or other upcoming events at school or otherwise that you think could be a cause of stress.
- Think of potential reactions your child might have and consider how you will handle them.
- Discuss your concerns and plans for the conversation with a trusted friend or family member.
- Think about when you will have this conversation. Try to avoid having the conversation at a time when either you or your child (or both) are particularly stressed out, distracted, or in a rush. Instead, pick a scenario in which you might already naturally be spending time together and see if you can broach the topic. For example, you may choose to bring up your concerns while you are driving somewhere together (as long as you have enough time together in the car and won't be too distracted or interrupted), during a family meal time, or during another activity you may do together on the weekend like practicing a sport or taking a walk or bike ride. You should also consider your child's privacy and use discretion in where you have the conversation, preferably in a private place. Try to avoid making a big "scene" out of having the conversation but rather let it be a natural way of "checking in." This will also pave the way for having conversations like this in a more comfortable manner in the future.

IDENTIFY SUPPORT

Don't wait until after you have the conversation to identify and activate any relevant support networks. Before you have the conversation, think about who in your life might be able to best support you, whether it's a spouse, a friend, or a family member. Talk to this

person openly about what’s going on and how you are feeling. Follow up with them after the conversation for additional support, especially if you are feeling heightened anxiety about your child’s well-being. Consider researching in advance what supports might be available to help your teen in case you discover serious concerns in the course of the conversation.

3.



HAVING THE CONVERSATION

When you get to the point of actually having the conversation, here are some tips on how to navigate the discussion. Remember, this should be an ongoing dialogue, so don’t put pressure on yourself to accomplish everything in one conversation. These issues are best covered over the course of several conversations (unless you have reason to believe there may be an acute emergency). Below are some ways to get the conversation started and how to conduct yourself during the conversation.

CONVERSATION STARTERS

- Starting the conversation is often one of the most difficult aspects. It can be challenging to know how to approach your teen, especially if he or she is withdrawn or irritable. Try to start the conversation during a time when you’re already in dialogue or spending time together. Try to find a moment when your child seems more open to having a discussion rather than approaching him or her when he or she is particularly irritable or moody. At the same time, remember that finding the “perfect” moment to have this conversation may be very difficult or even impossible and it’s more important to have the conversation in a timely fashion than to wait for some sense of the perfect timing.
- To start the conversation, ask your teen how he or she is doing in general. You might be surprised to find that what you get in response opens up a dialogue.
- If asking how your teen is doing or feeling results in a curt or one-word answer, follow up by gently and non-judgmentally describing what you have noticed about their mood and/or behavior recently. Try to start with one observation rather than overwhelming with a laundry list of things that are concerning you. For example, you might say: “It seems like you’ve been spending more time in your room. How are things going with your friends lately?” Or “You seem particularly stressed out lately. How are things going at school?”

GENERAL CONVERSATION TIPS

- **Avoid overly declarative language.** Try to spend more time listening than talking. Avoid making a lot of declarations about what you hear. Comments that suggest a judgment about your child’s emotions, e.g. “you are overly anxious” or “you’re too angry,” are particularly unhelpful. Instead, you should focus on describing what you are observing

and asking follow-up questions about your observations. For example, “you seem very upset about your friends’ behavior. Can you tell me more about what upsets you about what they’re doing?”

- **Ask open-ended questions.** Phrase your questions so they require more than a one-word answer. Instead of asking “Are things okay with your friend Sharon?” ask “How are things going with your friend Sharon lately? I noticed that you haven’t been talking to her as much.” You may of course still get a one-word answer, but you are less likely to if you ask open-ended questions.
- **Make sure you are not minimizing anything.** Some of the things your child may be extremely distressed about may not sound like a big deal to you. Feeling left out by a friend group, focusing excessively on a romantic interest, or worrying about an upcoming test may not seem like cause for so much concern to you, but to a teen, these kinds of concerns can be distressing. **It’s extremely important that you validate your child’s emotions.** No matter the actual circumstances, all of your child’s emotions are valid. For example, if your child says he or she feels extremely hurt because of not being invited to a recent party, you may be inclined to say something like “It’s just one party - don’t be upset.” While you may think you are helping to give your child perspective, these kinds of comments will only make your teen feel like you don’t understand how they feel and will result in them talking to you less. Instead, you should utilize the following formula: acknowledge the emotion, express empathy for the emotion, and find out more. For example: “It sounds like you are feeling really hurt [Acknowledge]. I’m so sorry you are feeling this way [Empathize]. What exactly about this situation is upsetting for you [Probe]?” It’s okay to help your teen recognize that he or she may be overreacting to or misreading a situation, but you want to ensure that you’re not rushing to solve the problem before you have fully explored what is happening and how your child feels.
- **Make deliberate choices about listening vs. fixing.** If your teen starts talking but seems to shut down when you offer a solution, try asking: “do you want me to listen or to try to help you fix the situation?” Your teen’s response will help you figure out how to best manage yours.
- **If you find out something that makes you angry or frightened, take a break.** There is a chance you may find out something during the conversation with your child that makes you angry or frightened. You may find out your child has been skipping classes or not being truthful with you about something. You should be prepared for this possibility prior to going into the conversation and have a plan for how you will respond. You may try to remind yourself that your child is suffering and that any behaviors that make you angry or seem out of character for your child may be part of a larger issue that’s your main concern here and is not your child’s fault. If this doesn’t work and you really feel like you can’t control your anger, try taking a break from the conversation. Tell your child, “Thank you for telling me that. It is difficult to hear and I need some time to process it. Can we continue the conversation in [however much time you need to take a break]?”

4.



WHAT TO DO IF THE CONVERSATION DOES NOT PROGRESS

It's very possible that you will describe your concerns and your teen will tell you he or she is "fine" and that absolutely nothing is wrong. But you might still be concerned. If you are not convinced by your teen's insistence that everything is okay, here are some tips on encouraging help-seeking behaviors:

- Gently prod but do not get angry or insistent. You may find that your impulse is to yell or raise your voice out of frustration. The more worried you are, the more likely you might be to go this route. Try to resist this and instead ask a few more questions before moving on from the conversation. For example, you can try to rephrase the question you used to open up the conversation or you can continue with some other observations about their behavior lately and inquire about those.
- Share your own experiences. Talk about a time when you struggled when you were young. Choose a time where your mom, dad, aunt or grandmother tried to talk to you because they were concerned. Share how this made you feel at the time and perhaps some perspective you may have gained on it.
- If after trying a few more angles, your teen is still completely shut down, don't force the conversation. There are a few other tactics you can try instead, including:
 - Talk to an adult that your teen trusts and likes about your concerns to see if they can attempt the same conversation. Parents often turn to their friends, pastor, or their teen's favorite aunt or adult cousin when it doesn't seem like they can get across to their child.
 - Provide resources that your teen should read through. Tell him or her that you're going to read them too and you hope to discuss them together in the next day or two. At the end of this document is a list of resources you can explore with your child.
 - Try the conversation again at a different time. Don't completely give up after one thwarted attempt. This can be a difficult topic to open up about for the first time, but if you show persistence and true concern, your child will be more likely to eventually start talking to you about this. If you have your own stories to share about difficult emotions, you should share them to help reinforce that it's okay to struggle and that it's possible to feel better too.

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AFTER THE CONVERSATION

Often the first conversation with your teen is just the beginning (and hopefully, it should be one of many). Throughout your child's adolescence and young adulthood, he or she will experience some issues that are minor and cause temporary feelings of distress. This is completely normal. But there may be other times when your child experiences distress that requires professional help. Figuring out how to distinguish between the two is often difficult and stressful for parents.

Here are some additional tips after your conversation with your teen:

- **Take stock of your own emotions:** After you bring up your concerns with your teen, you may experience some difficult emotions yourself, including worry, anger, nervousness, or disappointment. In order to ensure that you can be there for your teen, you should take care of yourself. Often hearing your teen talk about distressing topics can trigger your own emotions related to parenting or even memories of difficulties you had when you were a young adult. Make sure you are taking stock of how you are feeling and keeping that separate from how your teen is feeling. At the same time, pay attention to your level of concern and trust your gut.
- **Reach out for help yourself:** Often when teenagers struggle, the family struggles. Finding resources to help you can be critical to your well-being as well as that of your family. These resources can be informal, like a friend, or more formal, like a therapist. Finding someone to talk to when your teen is struggling may help you find ways to manage the demands of home and work, develop positive coping strategies, create a support network, and let you know that you will not be alone as you go through this process.
- **Find ongoing help for your teen:** If your teen acknowledges that talking to a professional would be beneficial, finding a good fit is important. You should start by getting referrals from a family doctor or other trusted medical specialist, family members, family friends, or other trusted acquaintances. You can find some affordable mental health treatment options through the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA). Visit <https://www.samhsa.gov/treatment> or call 1-800-662-HELP (4357). Try to identify a therapist who takes a genuine interest in getting to know and understand your teen and in whom your teen can confide. Check in with your teen to ensure that he or she is able to feel comfortable and form a bond with the therapist.
- **Use the information you have constructively:** When having conversations with teens, parents may hear information they wish they didn't or they may realize things about their child that they never knew (or wanted to know). In order to maintain open communication with your teen, try to use the information they confided in you for constructive purposes. Try to never use the information to "punish" your teen during times of high tension or in other situations that can violate their trust and reduce the likelihood of them talking to you in the future. You want your teen to feel as if they have an ally.

RESOURCES

CRISIS RESOURCES:

- **National Suicide Prevention Lifeline:** 1-800-273-8255
- **Crisis Text Line:** Text “START” to 741 741

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- **JED’s Mental Health Resource Center:** jedfoundation.org/help
- **JED resources for families and communities:**
jedfoundation.org/what-we-do/families-communities
- **ULifeline:** <http://www.ulifeline.org/>
- **Starting the Conversation: College and Your Mental Health:**
jedfoundation.org/jed-nami-guide-starting-conversation-college-mental-health-pdf/#ppsShowPopUp_110
- **Preparing for College: The Mental Health Gap:** <https://www.webmd.com/special-reports/prep-teens-college/default.htm>
- **Youth Suicide Warning Signs:** youthsuicidewarningsigns.org
- **Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration:**
samhsa.gov/treatment
- **National Alliance on Mental Illness:**
nami.org/find-support/teens-and-young-adults
- **National Institute of Mental Health:**
nimh.nih.gov/health/topics/child-and-adolescent-mental-health/index.shtml