



How to have conversations about mental health

Depending on your role or service, you may have varying amounts of time and space to have conversations about mental health. But even small steps to challenge stigma and help people can make a big difference. Here are some tips to help you with having conversations about mental health.

Someone in urgent need of help

If someone [needs urgent help](#) due to their mental health, for example if you think they might attempt suicide or self-harm or have seriously harmed themselves, you can support them by:

- If they are not safe by themselves right now – stay with them and help them call 999 for an ambulance, if you feel able to do so. Or you could help them get to A&E.
- If they can keep themselves safe for a little while – you can get quick medical advice by contacting NHS 111. Or you could help them make an emergency GP appointment to see a doctor. You can also encourage them to call the Samaritans on 116 123 to talk to someone, 24 hours a day.

Starting conversations about mental health

Sometimes starting a conversation about mental health is the hardest task, and it's important not to be discouraged by negative experiences.

Here are some tips to help start conversations:

- 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've 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 (see Someone in urgent need of help).

- Find a quiet place with an informal atmosphere, such as a café. A conversation about mental health shouldn't feel like a formal interview.
- Ask someone how they are doing or feeling. Encourage them to engage with an open question focused on them and their wellbeing.
- Use your own personal experiences as a conversation starting point. Be clear on what you're happy to share, before you get started.
- Talk about how you maintain personal wellbeing, relax or de-stress (for example, how you may use sport or physical activity as part of your daily or weekly routine).
- Use topical news stories to highlight interesting points.

Managing conversations about mental health

- Actively listen to the person by giving them your undivided attention. Leave any questions or comments until the person has finished, so you don't interrupt them.
- Once someone knows they're being given the space and time to talk, they're more likely to open up.

- Reflecting the words they've used can encourage them to open up more.
- Use empathetic statements such as: "I appreciate this must be difficult for you..."
- Avoid clichés. Comments like "pull yourself together" or "you're just having a bad day" are unhelpful.
- Remind them that mental health problems are more common than people think, and that they can affect anyone at any time.
- 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:
 - Can you describe how you're feeling?
 - How do you look after yourself?
 - What support do you have in place?
- Reassure them it's positive they want to talk about their experience, and that they've acknowledged they want support (if this is the case).
- Ask if they're aware of sources of support, and signpost them to relevant information and help. It may be helpful to ask "What would you like to happen in this situation?" This will help to empower and encourage them to take the course of action that seems right to them. Be clear about what you can do, as well as what you can't.
- The important thing is to listen rather than give advice – the person needs to be able to act for themselves. Signpost them to sources of support, rather than telling them what you think is best.

Closing conversations about mental health

Closing conversations effectively helps to reassure the person that their thoughts and feelings have been listened to, and helps to clarify next steps.

- Sometimes conversations will come to a natural end. If this doesn't happen, provide a gentle indication that the conversation needs to come to an end. You could say something like: "It's been good to talk. We've covered a lot and we will have to wrap up soon because I have another session," or something similar.
- Summarise the conversation and anything you've both agreed to do. For example: "You've told me you're going to speak to your GP about how you're feeling, and I will email you details of your local Mind."
- Ask practical questions such as "Will someone be there when you get home?" or "Is there a friend you can go and see?"
- Offering a listening ear and showing your acceptance, warmth and regard can go a long way to help someone. It may not be possible to get a clear idea of the next steps they'll take as a result of talking to you. Ending the conversation by inviting them to take some time to reflect on what you've discussed, and to consider what they may want to do next could be the best way to bring the conversation to a close. This is especially true if you feel there's nothing more you can say at that time.
- If you feel it would be helpful, that it's appropriate within the boundaries of your role, and you're able to commit to giving more of your time in this way, you may want to arrange another time to meet and talk.