

WHAT IF A CHILD OR TEEN TALKS TO YOU ABOUT THEIR MENTAL HEALTH?



DO

Listen. Really listening means stopping the voice in your own head and actively paying attention to the person who is speaking. This is hard for everyone, but practice helps!

Ask if they've thought about what they might need to get better. If they haven't, offer to support to listen and talk it out with them. If they have, support them in following through with their needs.

Learn. If they bring you information, read it. Learn as much as possible about your child's condition and the realities of mental health disorders. The MHA website (www.mentalhealthamerica.net) is a good resource for information about symptoms and treatment options.

Make sure to keep things confidential, unless it is life threatening.

Normalize. Assure your child that having a mental health issue is common, and does not mean that they can't get better.

Acknowledge your fear, but don't let it rule your behaviors. As a parent it is important to confront stigma or discrimination directly.

Offer an impartial counselor, and assure your child that information will be confidential.

Prepare to be an advocate. Finding the right mental health treatment is like finding the right medical provider. It takes time and effort to make sure you're getting the best care for your child or teen.

DON'T

Minimize how they are feeling or tell them "you shouldn't think that way." It's difficult for a young person to start the conversation; remember that they probably worried about it for some time before coming to you.

Let your emotions rule your response – especially if you're angry. Negative words ("You're never gonna get it together, are you?") can set someone back for a long time and add to stress and problems. It's also not uncommon for parents to feel guilt and blame themselves. If your child has a brain-based illness, it is not your fault, but you can be part of the solution.

Use the word "crazy".

Tell your child what they SHOULD do; instead, ask what they want you to help them with.

Delay action. Especially if your child shares that they have bizarre thoughts or asks about strange sounds, PAY ATTENTION and EXPLORE. These experiences are early warning signs of more serious mental health problems. Acting early can change the trajectory of their lives.

Make excuses or blame others. "This is the school's fault, they should have given you more individual attention."

Compare your child to their siblings. "Your brother doesn't have these problems. Why can't you be more like him?"

WHAT IF IT'S NOT YOUR CHILD?

Ask if the young person has told their parents yet. If not, delicately try to figure out why. You may hear reasons like, "My parents have too much going on" or "They won't believe me." MHA's *Time to Talk: Uncomfortable, but Important – Guide for Adolescents and Teens* has more information about common concerns young people have about talking to their parents and tips for talking. Offer to help the young person start a conversation with their parents if they would like. Explain that you can provide advice and information, but only a parent or guardian can get them certain kinds of help, like a visit with a doctor or mental health professional. If you suspect abuse or neglect, call the Childhelp National Abuse Hotline at 800.422.4454 to get guidance from a trained volunteer about what steps you should take.

NOW WHAT?

Now that you've had a conversation it is important to follow up appropriately. Your next steps are largely going to depend upon what you've been told. Some problems may require professional help, and others may be situational or temporary requiring your emotional support and advice. Some considerations to keep in mind are:

WHAT KIND OF SYMPTOMS IS THE CHILD/TEEN EXPERIENCING?

If there is self-injury (such as cutting or hair pulling), threat of harming self or others (including discussion of suicide), or a disconnection with reality (hearing or seeing things that aren't there, or having strange thoughts), then you should seek help from a mental health professional as soon as possible. Symptoms like irritability, changes in sleep or appetite, and loss of interest in certain activities that the child/teen used to enjoy, could be associated with puberty or be early signs of a mental health problem. For a comprehensive look at the changes associated with adolescence, check out, *The Teen Years Explained: A Guide to Healthy Adolescent Development*, from the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health.

HOW LONG HAVE THE SYMPTOMS BEEN GOING ON?

Has your child been struggling over the last few days? Weeks? Months? Now that you've determined what symptoms your child is experiencing, it's important to establish when symptoms started, whether they are persistent or come and go, and if they have gotten worse over time. Mental health problems tend to last for longer than 1-3 days. Feeling consistently "off" for weeks is a good sign that you need to seek a professional assessment.

WHEN ARE THE SYMPTOMS THE WORST, AND DO THEY FOLLOW PATTERNS?

As you learn about your child's symptoms, you may notice that they are associated closely with certain situations. For instance, if your child/teen is worried every morning before school and sad afterward, but seemingly better on weekends, this could be a sign of bullying or other difficulties with their peer group and be best addressed by finding a way to improve their school environment. In cases of girls and young women, mood swings may align with hormonal cycles and require little or no action, or an evaluation from a gynecologist. Maybe changes in mood are due to a triggering event, like a fight with a friend or trauma. In these moments, it's important to identify the triggering event and provide a safe space for your child to express and work through thoughts and feelings. On the other hand, some events or situations may trigger signs or symptoms of a mental health problem. For instance, if your child/teen has a minor physical problem (i.e. ache or bump), obsesses over the problem and seems convinced they are dying because of it, or struggles to breathe when worrying, they could be showing signs of an anxiety problem. Taking notice of details can help determine the nature of problems and what kind of actions you should take to best address them.