

TALKING TO PARENTS



Talking to a parent about mental health can be scary for a number of reasons.

Many people report being afraid to tell their parents because they do not want to upset them. Sometimes we don't understand where troubling feelings or thoughts are coming from and feel guilty for having them. A good question to ask yourself in this situation is how would you feel if someone you love were suffering and came to you? Likely, you would be upset that they were struggling, but you would not be upset with them. You would be glad they confided in you and ready to help them in any way you could.

Here are some of the most common concerns people give for not talking to their parents and some tips for overcoming them.

“ I don't know how my parents will react. ”

Talking can be scary, but the help available is worth it. The sooner you address things, the sooner you can feel better and the better you will be in the long-run. If you are concerned about how your parents will respond, one option is to schedule a meeting with both of them or with one parent at a time. Instead of a sudden, potentially unexpected conversation, choose a time and place where you are comfortable and plan what you want to say beforehand. You can plan by researching information online, taking a mental health screening and printing the results, or just by writing out a script for what you'd like to say.

On that note, you could also write a letter if you are not as comfortable with a conversation. A letter allows you to express exactly what you want to say without the pressure of an immediate response. Check out our sample letter on page 2. Remember, even if it seems scary or if your family never discusses these things, you are doing what is right for you. Be honest with where you are and think about the specific support you need from them. Focus on actions they can take or things they can change.

“ My parents will be sad or disappointed. ”

It might be hard for your parents not to show that they are sad, upset or disappointed. They might be sad that you are suffering, but this does not mean they are upset with you. In fact, many parents are upset because they care about you. Parents often wonder if there was something they could have done differently that would have prevented you from struggling.

Maybe you feel that there are high expectations of you and you're afraid that having mental health problems will be a disappointment. It's important to ask where these expectations come from and whether the expectations are real (have you been told certain things are expected, or are you assuming they are expected) or reasonable. Thinking through and explaining your fears about their sadness or disappointment might help them to respond in a way that is more helpful for you.

“ My parents will be angry or won't take me seriously. ”

Another concern many people have is that their parents will become angry or dismiss their feelings, both of which are painful experiences when you are already hurting. When dealing with a potential conflict, it is helpful to plan a meeting or to write a letter saying that you are worried about anger or dismissal. Explain to your parents that you are struggling and believe you would benefit from extra support. If they dismiss your concerns, tell them that you are trying to take care of yourself and would like to at least have a discussion with a professional. You can also support your desire for treatment with information and mental health screening results.

A lot of the time, reacting with anger or dismissal is about fear. Your parents might not know how to react or may have preconceived notions about what it means to get help for mental health concerns. Even if they do not know the best way to respond, it is important that you speak up for yourself, as we know the earlier a person gets help the better they are in the long-run. You may have to turn to other trusted adults or mental health resources if needed.

“My parents will ask too many questions.”

Sometimes parents will get upset and afraid and want to know all of the details of what you are experiencing. While only you know your parents and level of comfort, do not feel that you have to share every detail of your experience. You may be unsure of how to describe what you're feeling or afraid of getting in trouble for certain behaviors. Your thoughts or concerns about how your family relates to one another might also be playing a role in what you're going through. There are reasons why you may not want to tell your parents every single detail of what is going on, and it makes sense to want some privacy when first opening up about your struggles.

It might help to plan or review what you are comfortable sharing beforehand. You can tell your parents that you would really like to speak to a mental health professional, as an outside input with knowledge and experience in what you are dealing with. While it is unhealthy to hold things in, it is important to make sure you are in a safe space when beginning to open up.

“My parents already have enough to worry about.”

All adults have responsibilities and stress. While some families may be dealing with more stressful or serious situations than others, your wellbeing and health is important and deserves attention—regardless of what else may be going on with your parents. If you're worried about stressing out your parents, pick a time to talk when things are calm, and bring information about what you're going through and what kind of help you would like.

“One or both of my parents are part of why I am struggling.”

If one or both of your parents contribute to your desire to seek help, there are several options for what you can do. If you trust one parent, you can explain how you are feeling and ask that they either tell or do not tell the other parent. Often parents may not be willing to keep things of this nature from one another so make sure to check beforehand.

This might be an opportunity to reach out to another trusted adult in your life. Guidance counselors in particular can be very helpful in these situations, as they have experience and expertise with students in similar situations. Other trusted adults may be able to help you as well, particularly in creating a plan to talk to your parents. While speaking with a trusted adult is not a substitute for a needed treatment program, outside resources can guide you to the help or support you need.

If you are currently experiencing physical abuse, sexual abuse, or neglect, inform a trusted adult. You can visit www.dorightbykids.org to find out more information on definitions of abuse and neglect, reporting, and what happens after you report.

“My parents do not believe me.”

Even if your parents care for you, sometimes it's hard for them to see what is actually going on. This could mean they label your struggles as typical “growing up” experiences, or they dismiss the entire possibility of getting help for mental health. Ignoring problems because they are unpleasant does not make them go away, and it is important for you to continue to ask for what you need. You can explain to them that, even though you hear their beliefs, you would like the chance to speak to a mental health professional based on your experiences and research.

If it is unlikely that you will change their minds, you may have to reach out to other resources. This includes teachers, relatives, and guidance counselors. These individuals could help you talk to your parents and/or put you in contact with resources to help. Even though your parents are not validating your struggles, it does not make them unreal or unimportant. If you need professional help, put together a list of reasons why this is the help you think you need. You can also lean on friends, online communities, and other accessible mental health resources like apps and online education.

For more information and resources in your area contact your local MHA affiliate. Find one near you at mentalhealthamerica.net/find-affiliate

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