

# BACK TO SCHOOL

## TIME TO TALK: UNCOMFORTABLE, BUT IMPORTANT!

### A GUIDE FOR PARENTS AND OTHER ADULTS



#### It's time to talk to your child or teen about their mental health when:

- You've noticed something just doesn't seem right, but aren't sure why.
- Your child/teen's behaviors seem different than others in their peer group.
- Your child/teen is starting to have difficulties at home, school or with friends.
- You've noticed some of the signs and symptoms below for more than a few weeks:



Feeling sad, empty, hopeless or worthless



Sensitivity to sound, sight, smell or touch



Feeling overly worried



Not being able to do school work



Your child hearing knocking or scratching sounds, or their name being called or seeing things that you don't hear or see.



Loss of interest in things they used to enjoy, or withdrawal from others



Changes in sleep patterns or energy levels



Irritability or restlessness



Problems with concentration, memory or thinking



Loss of appetite or overeating

#### You should seek assistance immediately if you become aware that your child/teen is:

- Having thoughts or making plans of killing or hurting them self or another person. If your child is showing signs of suicidal or self-injurious thoughts, seek immediate assistance. If you are not present or able to get them right away, ask them calmly to promise you that they will not act on those thoughts until you are with them or can get them help. It is a well-known phenomenon that most people will honor these "promise contracts" for a defined period of time.
- Hearing voices or seeing things that no one else can hear or see.
- Experiencing unexplainable changes in thinking, speech, or writing.
- Being overly suspicious or fearful.
- Showing a drastic and sudden decline in school performance.
- Having sudden personality changes that are bizarre or out of character.

If your child or teen is in crisis, call 1-800-273-TALK (8255), go to your local Emergency Room or call 911.

If you're still not sure whether your child or teen is showing the early warning signs of a problem, take the parent screen.



[www.mhascreening.org](http://www.mhascreening.org)  
Anonymous • Free • Confidential

# TIPS FOR TALKING

The first step in starting a conversation is to choose a good time. It's really important to make space to be together without an agenda or pressure. Conversation tends to flow best when it naturally occurs. Consider bringing up the topic of mental health when doing chores, cooking, hanging out, or in the car. Be aware of changes in your child's willingness to engage with you. If they are busy, or having a bad day you may want to wait until they are less preoccupied.

## CONVERSATION STARTERS



### OBSERVATIONS

In a non-judgmental way let your child/teen know that you've noticed:

- They don't seem to be hanging out or talking to their friends as much as usual.
- That their school work seems to be suffering. This may be indicated by slipping grades, assignments going undone, or a general lack of interest in anything school related. Offer extra help if it's simply trouble with the subject matter.
- Their mood seems to have "darkened." For instance, they may be talking about death or dying, giving away belongings, or posting pictures (or other signs of interest) in dead celebrities or other morbid topics.



### SCREENING RESULTS

If you took the parent screen at [mhascreening.org](https://mhascreening.org) and the results indicated your child/teen may be showing signs of an emotional, behavioral or cognitive disorder print out the results and share them. You can also ask your child/teen to take the youth screen at: [mhascreening.org](https://mhascreening.org).



### EXPERIENCE

Maybe you have a mental health disorder yourself and recognize some of the symptoms you've struggled with in your child/teen. Perhaps you have a friend or family member who has struggled and notice similarities in your child/teen. Be sure to keep the tone of the conversation hopeful, and remind your child/teen that these disorders are common and treatable.



### INFORMATION

Do some research online on health organization or government websites and print any pertinent information you want to bring up during your conversation.

# 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](http://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?

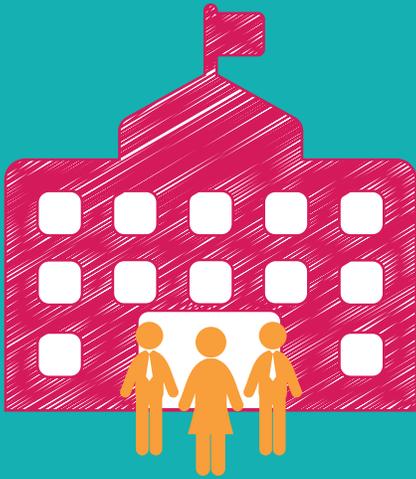
Has your child been struggling over the last few days? Weeks? Months? Now that you've determined what symptoms your child is experiencing, it's important to establish when symptoms started, whether they are persistent or come and go, and if they have gotten worse over time. Mental health problems tend 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.

# WHERE TO START GETTING HELP

## SCHOOL SUPPORT STAFF



If you feel like your child needs accommodations in school, it's worthwhile to start early in soliciting support from the school system. The process of obtaining an Individualized Education Program (IEP) can be daunting and complicated, but hang in there. You will first have to request an evaluation. It is best to do this in writing. Having prior treatment or testing through a psychologist might help you to talk about why your child is eligible and conceptualize the kinds of changes that can help in school. Until then, other school support staff (guidance counselor, school social worker, or a teacher) might also provide extra support and guidance. Learn more about IEPs at: [www2.ed.gov/parents/needs/speced/iepguide/index.html](http://www2.ed.gov/parents/needs/speced/iepguide/index.html).

## YOUR LOCAL MHA AFFILIATE



Mental Health America has over 200 affiliates in 41 states that are available to help you find information and resources around mental health disorders, treatment and support strategies. Find the affiliate in your area at [mentalhealthamerica.net/find-affiliate](http://mentalhealthamerica.net/find-affiliate).

## YOUR FAMILY DOCTOR



Pediatricians and primary care doctors are not mental health professionals, but some are trained to recognize the symptoms of mental health disorders and can help to distinguish between other health problems. You may want to start by calling your child's doctor to discuss symptoms over the phone. They can decide based on your conversation whether you should bring your child in for an office visit, or make a referral to another doctor/mental health professional.

# DEALING WITH YOUR OWN FEELINGS

## FEAR AND ANXIETY

You're not sure what to do. You knew someone with a mental health condition and life was rough for them. It's ok and normal to have these thoughts, but important to remain composed during a conversation with your child. Do your best to focus on your child's needs and concerns as they confide in you. They are likely already fearful and nervous about what they have been experiencing and are looking to you for support, guidance, and reassurance. Once you've finished having a conversation with your child, get informed. Visit [mentalhealthamerica.net](http://mentalhealthamerica.net) to learn more about symptoms, conditions, and treatment and support options.

Keep in mind that almost 60 million Americans have a diagnosable mental health condition in any given year and media coverage disproportionately focusses on those instances with the worst outcomes. The vast majority of people with mental health conditions live full, productive, healthy lives with proper treatment.

## DISBELIEF

"Not my kid." "How can this be happening?" Confusion and disbelief may be your initial reaction to hearing that your child is having problems, but pretending like it isn't happening doesn't make it any less real. Mental health conditions are real, and common, and most of the time symptoms start during youth. It is important to take your child seriously if they've come to you in need of help, because the sooner you are able to address their problems, the more likely they will be to get better.

## GUILT

It can be easy to think about all the "what ifs", and things you should have or could have done when your child tells you they are struggling with their mental health. While it can be easy to think this way, it certainly isn't helpful. Keep your focus on what your child has told you and how you can help him or her moving forward, rather than dwelling on the past. You can't change what has already happened, but you can make a big difference in what will happen.

It's a parent's job to raise their child, but ultimately that child is or is becoming his or her own person (especially during and after puberty). Parents cannot control genetic expression, or every element of the environment that affects the child. Even so, just as there are risk factors for development of mental health conditions, there are also protective factors that help to combat risk, and prevent symptoms from becoming more severe or frequent. Do your part to learn more about protective factors and ways to foster resilience in your child and put them into action. Don't forget about the good that you've done as a parent. Think about the qualities you've instilled in your child to make them strong, and help them cope with problems. Thank them for placing trust in you, which led to their feeling safe and able to seek help. Think about how you can continue to reinforce those qualities as you provide support to your child in their time of need.

## SADNESS OR DISAPPOINTMENT

It hurts to see your child hurting. Life can be hard enough, and as a parent, naturally you don't want life to be any more difficult for your child than it has to be. It's ok to let your child know that it's hard for you to learn that they are struggling, but reassure him or her that their struggles don't mean that they have let you down. Reserve any further expression of sadness for a separate conversation between yourself and another adult. Getting early and proper support and treatment for mental health problems can help get your child back on a better path.

Regardless of which particular feelings you have after a discussion with your child about their mental health, it is important to seek support for yourself as you seek support for your child. Talk to friends and loved ones. Join an online support group. You are not alone and may be able to glean valuable lessons from others who have sought help for their children.



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