



MENTAL HEALTH:

# ASK. LISTEN. TALK.

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A SIMPLE GUIDE TO HELPING OTHERS



# Helping others with a mental health problem

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Approximately 1 in 5 people in Northern Ireland will experience a mental health problem at any one time. The other 4 will have a friend, family member or colleague who will.

Talking with friends and loved ones about their problems is never easy. Often they don't want to talk. Sometimes they do, and we just don't realise. When they do start talking, it can be difficult to know how to respond. If a problem is really bad, what can we say? Every situation is different, and there are no definitive answers. It can be as simple as getting them to talk about what's happening and listening to their problems and worries.

It is important that we look out for each other and this leaflet aims to help you to ask, listen and talk to someone you know who may be experiencing a mental health illness or mental health problem.

# Talking

## What do I say to someone who has/may have a mental health problem?

If you suspect someone may be experiencing a mental health problem, mental illness or having suicidal thoughts, talking to them about it may really help their recovery.

If you are worried about someone's mental health, starting the conversation may not be as difficult as you think. You might be worried that the other person doesn't want to talk about their mental health. If they don't, that's OK and you can't force them to talk to you. You may also be afraid that you will not know how to offer help but there is lots of support available to help you. Starting that conversation is important and can really help change someone's life for the better.

Whilst every situation is different, here are some of the ways you can approach difficult conversations.

### How do you know there's a problem?

A lot of us prefer not to talk about our problems. Needing help can be seen as weak. But if friends or loved ones don't tell us something's bothering them, how are we supposed to know?

Sometimes people can put out some signals. The signs are often there if we know what to look out for. Here are some of the ways that people signal that they may need help:

- Putting themselves down in a serious or jokey way, like 'Oh, no one loves me' or 'I'm a waste of space.'
- Losing interest in their appearance.
- Using drugs and/or alcohol as a comfort.
- Changes in sleeping and/or eating habits.
- Being uncharacteristically clumsy or accident prone.
- Making leading statements, like 'You wouldn't believe what I've been through' or 'Someone up there's got it in for me.'

# Asking

The best way to help is to ask questions. That way you leave the other person in control. By asking questions, the person you are talking with finds their own answers. The only question to try to avoid is 'why?' – it can sound challenging, and put the other person on the defensive.

### How to have 'the conversation'?

All you need to do is start the conversation. By being understanding, tactful and gentle, there's a better chance that someone will want to talk. Some useful phrases are:

- Are you ok?
- Is there anything you want to talk about?
- Is there anything I can do?
- Why don't we have a coffee and talk about it?
- I've been a bit worried about you.
- I'd really like to help

Avoid responses which reject how they are feeling, lessen how they feel, or try to change their view of their situation. Examples of what **NOT** to say:

- It's not that bad
- Things will get better
- How could you be so selfish

These reactions may make the person feel misunderstood and more isolated than ever.

Nobody expects you to know the answers. Not knowing the answers doesn't mean you're not helping. You can really help by being an active listener.



# Listening

We can all think of situations where we found it hard to talk about something that was troubling us. Difficult, painful or embarrassing situations which we find almost impossible to speak to someone else about. Imagine you've got a close friend who needs to get something difficult off their chest. How do you get them to open up? Active listening is a way of listening which helps people talk through their problems, no matter how difficult they find it to put into words. It sounds a strange idea. We assume that when we listen, we don't actually do anything. Well, not necessarily.

With active listening, although you do some talking, you're really just acting as a sounding board. What you say doesn't influence what the other person has to say. It just helps them to talk. All too often, we say things which bring conversations to a halt, like 'I know just how you feel' or 'Try not to worry about it.' Although they're meant well, they don't encourage the person you're speaking with to continue talking. They tend to wrap up what the other person was just saying instead. With active listening, you can avoid this.

Let the person talk about their feelings and listen carefully to what they have to say. Don't judge them and rather than dismissing their thoughts as 'silly', try to understand why they are feeling this way. Let them know you care.



# How to be an active listener

## Open questions

Rather than asking questions which only require a yes or no answer, try to ask open questions. For example, instead of saying 'Has this been going on for a long time?' try asking 'How long has this been going on?' That way, instead of closing the conversation down to a 'yes' or 'no' response, you open it out and encourage the other person to keep talking.

## Summarising

It helps to show that you've listened to, and understood, what's been said. You can do this by summarising. For example, 'So you're being treated terribly by your partner, but you still love them?'

## Reflecting

Repeating back a word or phrase can encourage people to go on. If someone says 'So it's been really difficult recently', you can keep the conversation going by simply reflecting on this and saying, 'It sounds like it's been really difficult for you.'

## Clarifying

We all skirt around or gloss over the most difficult things. If we can avoid saying them, we will. If the person you're speaking with glosses over an important point, try saying 'Tell me more about....' or '....sounds a difficult area for you.' This can help them clarify the points, not only for you, but for themselves.

## Reacting

You don't have to be completely neutral. If whoever you're talking with has been having an absolutely dreadful time, some sympathy and understanding is vital. 'That must have been difficult' or 'You've had an awful time' can be helpful things to say.

All of this sounds quite simple. And it is. All you're doing is listening, and from time to time giving responses which encourage the other person to keep talking. That's the key – get them to keep talking.

# Getting help

Talking about issues that are affecting your mental health can really make a difference and make you feel better. However, there are times when professional help is required. Suggest that the person makes an appointment to see their GP. It may help to get the number for them or suggest you will accompany them to their appointment. If someone is in distress you can call Lifeline on **0808 808 8000**. If someone is in crisis, dial **999**.

## Look after yourself

Witnessing someone you care about in a distressed state and/or providing support can also take its toll on you. It is important that you also look after your mental health and do not take on more than you are comfortable with. Make sure you put support measures in place for yourself and also seek support if necessary.

There are some further information on mental health and how to seek help within the following websites:

[www.mindingyourhead.info](http://www.mindingyourhead.info)  
[www.changeyourmindni.org](http://www.changeyourmindni.org)  
[www.lifelinehelpline.info](http://www.lifelinehelpline.info)

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## CHANGE YOUR MIND

[www.changeyourmindni.org](http://www.changeyourmindni.org)

[www.mindingyourhead.info](http://www.mindingyourhead.info)

Public Health Agency,  
12–22 Linenhall Street  
Belfast BT2 8BS  
Tel: 0300 555 0114 (local rate)

[www.publichealth.hscni.net](http://www.publichealth.hscni.net)

