

How to talk to someone you're worried about

If someone you care about is experiencing a struggle with mental health or substance use, having an open, honest conversation about it can help them feel cared for and understood. It can also encourage them to seek support or treatment, if necessary. But these types of conversations aren't always easy. It can be uncomfortable to talk about such private issues, especially for the person who's struggling. The good news is that you don't need to be an expert to have an open, authentic conversation about mental health or substance use—and starting one can make a real difference.

Things to Keep in Mind

One of the most helpful things you can do is simply give this person space to talk. Give them your full attention and acknowledge how they feel, even if you've never experienced the same feelings. Be patient, too. Helping someone through a difficult time doesn't happen overnight. Continue to reach out with offers to listen and help.



Maintain positive body language

Without us realizing it, our body language reveals clues about what we're thinking and feeling. To make someone feel more supported during conversation, keep your arms and legs uncrossed, and point your legs and feet toward them. Maintain eye contact and keep your face neutral. Smile if they smile. Make sure your tone of voice is calm, even if you're worried or upset. If it feels appropriate, reach out to gently touch their hand or arm.



Don't be judgmental.

Give your advice and opinions without judgment. Aim for attentive, non-judgmental language to keep communication open. This shows a person that you're not disapproving or critical of them, which will result in fewer misunderstandings and help a speaker feel more comfortable openly sharing.



Keep it casual.

We often think of an important conversation as a somewhat intimidating event—having 'the big talk'. But you can do it in a casual way to avoid things feeling too formal. Try bringing it up while you're both playing a game or out for a walk, so that it's not the main topic of conversation. This can help put the other person at ease, and it also normalizes talking about mental health and substance use.



Stay calm.

Sometimes our worry for others can manifest as anger or stress, which can make it harder for someone to open up to you. Remember, they are the ones struggling and you are here to help. If you begin to feel upset, take a few deep breaths to remain calm and centered.



Be patient.

Helping someone through a difficult time doesn't happen overnight. Continue to reach out with offers to listen and help.



If the person you're worried about reports feeling suicidal or is engaging in self-injury, encourage them to access emergency mental health support.

For immediate help, call 911 or 988,

the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline.

These resources are free, confidential, and available for everyone.

➤ **Ask how you can help.** Focus on their needs, and be prepared to support in whatever way they need you. If you think they might be more comfortable talking with someone else, you can offer to help connect them.

"Do you want to talk through some possible solutions, or would it be more helpful if I just listen?"

"Is our talk helping you, or is there someone else you'd feel more comfortable going to for support?"

➤ **Express your concern.** When it's time to raise the topic, tell them what you've noticed. Start by expressing how much you care for them, and follow it up with an observation so that they understand the reasons for your concern. Ask them how they've been feeling and if they'd like to talk about anything.

"It seems like you have a lot going on at home right now. Is there anything I can do to help?"

"I'm worried about you because it seems like you've been drinking a lot more than usual. Is everything okay?"

➤ **Normalize mental health and substance use struggles by talking about them directly.**

Stigma and shame are common reasons why people don't ask for help when they need it. When we talk about difficult emotions in an open, honest way, we show them that they're not alone, that treatment is available, and that they are supported.

"I've dealt with anxiety myself."

"It's completely normal to go through a tough period like this."

"Plenty of people struggle with alcohol, especially when they're going through a rough time in life."

➤ **Encourage seeking professional help.** Sometimes people mistakenly think that therapy should be a last resort. They may believe that it's only for people with a serious mental illness, or who are contemplating suicide. Remind this person that therapy can be useful for a range of problems, and even a few sessions can help.

"Sometimes taking the first step is the hardest part. Would you like me to help you get connected with a therapist?"

"Have you considered talking to a counselor about this? It can be helpful to get the perspective of someone who knows how to handle this type of situation."

➤ **Avoid stigmatizing language.** Often, the language used to talk about mental health and substance use can contribute to stigma, which keeps people from getting the support they need. Be conscious of the words you use to describe people, conditions, and behaviors. Using person-first language is a great place to start, because it acknowledges someone as a person rather than a diagnosis.

"If you ask me, mental health and substance use checkups should be a normal part of self-care, just like we're all supposed to have regular dental checkups."

"Just like help is available for diabetes and skin cancer, help is available for substance use disorders."

➤ **Don't overthink it.** Remember, there's no such thing as a perfect time to reach out. The most important thing is simply that you do it. Start the conversation casually to help put the person you care about at ease.

"How's life?"

"What's been going on with you lately?"

Download additional information on how to talk to someone you're worried about here: mentalhealthtx.org/check-in/HHS_Guide_How_to_Talk_to_Someone_You're_Worried_About_MoreInfo.pdf



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