

# Starting a conversation about mental health

We don't often talk about our mental health, so it might seem daunting to start a conversation about it. However, it is important to remember you don't have to be an expert. Giving a young person the opportunity to open up and have a conversation about their mental health can play a vital role in reassuring them that help is available. You can then signpost them to appropriate support.

Once you have spotted the signs of mental ill health, you can use the Take Time Together toolkit to start a conversation with the young person. Taking time to start a meaningful conversation about mental health can make a huge difference to a young person. Here are some ideas to get you started.



## Creating a safe space

- Give yourself plenty of time so you don't appear to be in a hurry
- Meet in a neutral space such as a café, a quiet room, or a pastoral room
- You don't want to be disturbed, so turn your phone off or to silent
- Sit down even if the other person is standing – it will make you seem less intimidating
- Make it clear to the young person that they are not in trouble



## Talking tips

- Keep your body language open and non-confrontational
- Be empathic and take them seriously
- Take into account cultural differences in communication styles, e.g. how much eye contact is appropriate
- Do not offer glib advice such as “pull yourself together” or “cheer up”
- Keep the chat positive and supportive, exploring the issues and how you may be able to help



## Useful questions to ask

- How long have you felt like this?
- How can I help you?
- How are you feeling at the moment?
- What kind of support do you think you might need?



## How to listen

- Give the person your full focus and listen without interrupting
- Be aware of their words, tone of voice, and body language – all will give clues as to how they are feeling
- Accept them as they are - respect the person's feelings, experiences, and values although they may be different from yours. Do not judge or criticise because of your own beliefs and attitudes
- Be genuine – show that you accept the person and their values by what you say and do
- Place yourself in the young person's shoes and demonstrate to them that you hear and understand what they are saying and feeling



## What happens next?

- Keep the conversation going – follow up and ask them how they are doing
- Reassure them that you are always here if they want to talk, and really mean it
- Give reassurance that there are lots of sources of support and some of these might be available at home, through their place of education, by visiting their GP, or online. If appropriate, offer to go with them to seek support
- Familiarise yourself with local, professional, online, and self-help resources so you can highlight some options