

TALKING ABOUT MENTAL ILLNESS AND MENTAL WELLNESS WITH CHILDREN AND TEENS

Parents and educators should be able to talk with children and teens about mental health and well-being in the same open and honest way we talk about physical health and well-being. We don't want our youth to be afraid or feel shame about mental illness. Just like we take care of ourselves and each other when we have a cold, we need to take care of ourselves and each other when we have a worry. And just like some physical illnesses require more intensive medical care, so do some mental illnesses. We can help our children recognize the range of their normal emotions and thoughts, including worried feelings and thoughts, sad feelings and thoughts, overwhelmed feelings and thoughts, etc., while teaching and modeling the tools for emotional regulation. And when someone feels worried or sad or overwhelmed all or most of the time, they need to know it's OK to seek help from medical or mental health professionals.

Children and teens are not insulated from news or conversations about mental health and mental illness. **When children know something is wrong but don't have information to make sense of it, they fill in their own explanations, which are often scarier than the truth and are not always based in fact.** That doesn't mean we need to tell children every detail when a loved one is experiencing a mental health crisis, but we do need to answer their questions and provide them with developmental and age-appropriate information they need to make sense of the situation.



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We can use physical health as a model for how we talk to children about mental well-being and mental illness:



Physical health: Children often hear about their medical problems. They understand that if they have asthma, their lungs and airways tighten up in response to dust, pets, cold or exercise. They know the wheezing makes them uncomfortable, so they need to take medications for relief and avoid situations that may trigger an attack.

Mental health: Similarly, you can let your child know mental health concerns like anxiety, depression, ADHD and OCD, among others, are also physical conditions that start with their brain. The brain controls feelings, thoughts and behavior — like the “central headquarters” of the body. Sometimes the brain gets “knocked off balance,” but, like other medical problems, they can learn to manage this with treatment, which can include medications and behavioral support such as stress reduction, relaxation and psychotherapies.

Some illnesses are more serious than others, and children may have questions when we are talking about a potentially fatal diagnosis, illnesses or death. Historically, there has been a lot of shame and stigma around suicide. But we now know that when someone is struggling with mental health, it is not unusual to have some thoughts of suicide.

If you are telling your child someone they know and love is struggling with a mental health condition, take into account their age as well as the context of the information. **Think ahead about the questions they may have and how you can answer them. Be honest without being graphic.** You might consult with a therapist or social worker before telling your child sensitive information. Consider the trusted adults a child can talk to if they have questions.

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Additional tips for talking to children about mental health and illness:

- Use language children understand, such as “helpful” or “unhelpful” thoughts and “safe” or “unsafe” behaviors.
- Model an ability to talk about mental wellness and illness without stigmatizing them. If you have family meetings, consider adding a regular check-in about mental and physical well-being.
- Recognize and normalize the spectrum of mental health challenges. If a child only hears the word “depression” in the context of a death by suicide or “mental illness” when discussing people who are unhoused, for example, the child will equate the outcome of depression with death and mental illness with homelessness. If the child knows depression is usually treatable and many people live with mental illnesses, including people they know, the language and concept of mental illness will not feel as scary.
- Normalize the range of emotions we all experience, and discuss ways to manage them. It helps when children recognize fear, boredom, frustration and sadness as healthy, normal feelings that help us navigate the world and our own actions.
- Discuss with your child the rituals or practices that add to your mental well-being, and help them develop their own, e.g., taking walks/exercising, taking a shower or bath, working on art, spending time with friends and family, singing or listening to music, engaging in hobbies, cooking, going to community gatherings, meditating, participating in prayer or other religious practice, practicing bedtime rituals, eating healthfully and following sleeping routines.

Learn more about mental health terminology in our [**Mental Health Glossary**](#). Also see [**How do we talk about suicide and suicidal ideation**](#).

