

Youth Mental Health and How to Talk About it!

Over the past few years, you may have noticed an increase in conversations and advertisements about mental health. You may have even taken part in some of the Healthy Minds at Magna activities in 2018 and 2019 if you are in Canada. The discussion about mental health and mental illness has come a long way, but you may still have questions. More specifically, you may not feel equipped to talk to the kids and teens in your life about mental health, and you may not know what signs to lookout for when it comes to changes in their mental health. Although each child and each family are different, the information below has been adapted from credible mental health resources and can be a great starting point for you.



Mental disorders are real medical conditions. There are many different types of mental disorders, each with a unique set of characteristics, signs, symptoms and treatments. The most common mental disorder is depression.

Depression is a mood-related disorder and as its name suggests, can affect how you feel, think, react, and behave. It is a disabling disorder that affects almost every aspect of your life including, relationships, work and your ability to carry out day-to-day activities.

Depression can affect a young person in the same way it can affect an adult. Many times, the warning signs of depression are missed in kids or teenagers, or the signs are brushed off as them just being moody due to “normal” changes they may be experiencing. Having open dialogue with children and youth in your family can be the key to identifying a mood-related disorder. Kids and teens who are struggling with depression are often unlikely to bring it up to you. They tend to worry they will be judged or won’t be believed. They may also struggle to understand what they are experiencing and, therefore, are unable to articulate their feelings or ask for the help they need. But the good news is there are things you can do. Having open conversations early and often, in addition to being aware of what to look for will help you support the youth in your life.

Below are some common signs that you can lookout for to help with early recognition and identification of depression.

What to Look For?

Physical Health

- Complaints of not feeling well, headaches, body aches and pain with an unknown cause
- Changes in eating and sleeping habits
- Unexplained/unintentional weight loss or weight gain
- Constantly tired and/or sluggish

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Thinking

- Hard time concentrating and possibly a change in school performance or grades
- Self-deprecating comments or saying things that indicate self-dislike, or low self-esteem
- If showing signs that indicate thoughts of suicide – talk to them about it. Bringing up the issue of suicide will not give them the idea or encourage them to do it. If they have thoughts of suicide, **seek professional help immediately!**

Behaviour

- Withdrawn or socially isolating
- Shows less or no interest in activities they used to enjoy
- Cry easily or have sudden outbursts of emotion, such as anger or frustration
- Overreact and irritable
- Prolonged periods of low mood or anxiety

How to Start?

It is important to have open conversations about mental health and mental illness early and often. If you haven't had a conversation with the youth in your family yet, don't panic. It's important to start these conversations when emotions aren't running high. Instead find a comfortable space and time where everyone can be involved. During the conversation, it is important to address that in life we will all experience low periods where we may feel a mix of emotions like sadness, anger, fear, guilt, etc. There will be experiences and events in life that can bring on these low periods, such as a death of a loved one. Encourage them to talk to you when they are feeling this way and reassure them that there won't be judgement or repercussions for them opening up to you. It is important to explain that although low periods are normal, when they persist over a long period of time and start to impact their ability to carry out daily activities, such as going to school or participating in extracurriculars, it is important to reach out for help.



Below is a list to help you feel prepared for these tough conversations.

1. Educate yourself on the basics of mental health. It is important to use reputable mental health resources like the Mental Health Commission of Canada or the Canadian Mental Health Association. You can also speak to a professional before having the initial conversation if that will help you feel more prepared and comfortable.
2. Choose a time and find a private space where you all feel comfortable.

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3. It is important to stay calm and not react in a way that may be perceived as negative, judgmental, or disappointed. Again, this is where being prepared and having done your research will come in handy.
4. Be reassuring, empathetic and open with them. If you feel they would benefit from additional support or you don't feel equipped to help them, suggest professional supports. Additionally, including your teen in the decision making and asking them what they think might help and can be very beneficial.
5. Remember to have ongoing conversations, and "check-in" with them to see how they may be coping. Pay attention to warning signs and any changes in their life, such as new stressors.

Support

Your first support can be the youth's family doctor or primary care physician. This medical professional will be able to make an assessment and refer them to a counsellor, social worker, peer support worker, psychiatrist, and/or psychologist. Another support can be the school and the teachers who may have more insight into some of the behavioural changes that have been observed. You can also work with the school to support the child through their mental disorder and ensure their educational goals are being met. Lastly, medications may be recommended by their primary care physician. If this is the case, they will provide you with advice and supervise the effects of the medication on your teen's mood.

Remember, don't be afraid to start the conversation. Educate yourself and seek the supports that you and your youth may need. Keep an open and supportive dialogue and remember that mental health is a major contributor to overall health.

References: <http://health.sunnybrook.ca/mental-health/talk-about-mental-illness-conversation-parents/>
<https://cmha.ca/documents/children-youth-and-depression>
<https://cmha.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Children-Youth-and-Depression-NTNL-brochure-2014-web.pdf>