

# PROMOTING MENTAL HEALTH

## Things you can do starting right now

- › Reflect that you value and accept your child for who he or she is. Don't assume that they already know it or don't need to hear it again.
- › Communicate with your kids. Encourage them to talk about what's happening in their lives – both the good stuff and the bad – while respecting that they may not want to disclose everything. Teenagers will keep secrets from their parents, but if a foundation of trust is in place they will be more likely to reach out when they really need help.
- › Make an effort to really listen to what your kids are telling you – reflect that you “get it” when you do, and ask for clarification when you don't. Show them that you want to understand them.
- › Let your kids know that you are safe to talk to. Explicitly tell them that you're open to talking about the really tough stuff, and that there's nothing they could tell you that would damage the relationship irreparably.
- › Model appropriate and healthy emotional responses and relationships with others.
- › Be open to a variety of kids of communication. Some young people might find it really difficult to open up in person, but not in an email or written note. Ask what works best for them and try to work with it.
- › Do your best to avoid involving your child in adult problems.
- › Work on your own mental health literacy. Educate yourself about mental health.
- › Challenge stigma when you see it, mindful of how you talk about mental illness, and your reactions to depictions of or encounters with individuals who have a mental disorder.

## Here's an idea!

Consider creating a set of codes or signals with your kids that will allow them to let you know that they have something really important to talk to you about. Signals could be anything: code words; a cryptic email message; the placement of a fridge magnet. Having this sort of system in place is a very concrete way of letting your child know that you are open to talking about the tough stuff, and that if you will be there when he or she needs you. It also has the advantage of giving you a window of time to prepare yourself for dealing with something that could be emotionally challenging.





## Things you can do in the moment.

### Don't Make Assumptions

- › Remember that it's okay not to have all of the answers – you're not expected to.
- › Keep in mind that many kids fear that their parents won't be willing to hear them out, so actively listening and making an effort to really understand what your child is saying is an incredibly important first step.
- › Don't make assumptions about what your child is going through. Instead, ask questions, show that you are interested, and acknowledge that if your child is bringing this concern to you that it's worthy of some time and attention. Making assumptions and shutting down the conversation before it starts is a significant missed opportunity for fostering communication and trust. And in cases when the child is, in fact, struggling with a mental health problem, parental dismissal can be very harmful and a significant barrier to the young person's recovery.
- › Don't talk to others about your child's experiences without asking first.
- › Don't rush to solutions. Moving too quickly to offering advice or next steps can shut the conversation down quickly and circumvent an opportunity for understanding the nuance of your child's experience and building trust

### Embrace the Opportunity

- › Be thankful that if your child is bringing concerns to you, he or she thinks you are worthy of time and attention. Ask questions, show that you are interested.
- › Ask your child what would be most helpful right now. Maybe your child just needs someone to listen, maybe [they] would like someone to do some research with them, maybe [they] would like you to go to the doctor's with them. You won't know what they most want from you until you ask.
- › Be open to collaborating on solutions, including solutions about the types of help or treatment you might consider pursuing.

### Take Care of Yourself

- › Having a child disclose a mental health related struggle – particularly if it leads you to fear that their physical health or life is in danger – can be incredibly distressing. Fear, sadness, guilt, anger, and helplessness are normal emotional reactions to this sort of news. Know that it's okay to be distressed (and give yourself time and space to process what you are feeling) but try not to let your own feelings overshadow what your child is going through. Monitor your own reactions – there's a good chance that your child will be hyper-attuned to your response, so try your best to remain neutral, present, and open.
- › Acknowledge that stigma does not only affect someone with a mental health concern, but their parents as well. You might feel judged or blamed for what your child is going through, or like it's somehow your fault. It's not. Be gentle with yourself and give yourself permission to be human. Maybe you aren't a perfect parent, but no one is.
- › Take care of yourself. Supporting your child through a mental health struggle is no easy task. Take advantage of whatever supports are available to you, and make sure to build in time to relax and recoup.

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