



HOW TO TALK TO YOUNG PEOPLE ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH

Mental health is a difficult topic to talk about, especially if you are experiencing a mental illness yourself. Naturally, as parents, we want to protect our young people from worry and from any shame, yet research shows that talking openly to our young people in an age-appropriate way may:

- Help them to understand and not be confused about what is part of their lives.
- Help them make sense of what they see at home.
- Help ensure that they know that our difficulties are in no way their fault and they are not to blame.
- Help them recognise signs and symptoms of mental health issues in themselves or others which may contribute to prevention.

Research also shows most young people will respond to having a parent with a mental illness in one of four ways.



Active Empathy - this young person tends to show strong empathic concern and prosocial behaviour without negative emotional responses. They usually come from supportive families who have open conversations about mental health, and are less likely to develop a mental illness themselves



Emotional Overinvolvement - this young person tends to focus on trying to alleviate their parent's distress and are often described as mirroring their parents' mood. They usually have parents who don't openly communicate and are authoritarians. Often these young people don't see their parents as a safe person to talk to about their feelings and are more likely to develop a mental illness.



Indifference - this young person tends to be indifferent or uninvolved with little awareness of their parents' moods. They usually come from supportive families who focus on the positive aspects of themselves and their children. However, they may have social difficulties as they are less aware of others' emotions, but are overall less likely to develop a mental illness.



Avoidance - this young person tends to be aware of their parent's mood but actively avoid becoming involved. They usually come from a families who tend to be negative and foccus on their children's faults. Unfortunately these young people have trouble recognising their own emotions and are more likely to experience a mental illness.

TIPS ON TALKING TO YOUNG PEOPLE ABOUT OUR MENTAL HEALTH:

Be open: Allow yourself time to feel confident about how you feel about your mental health before discussing it with your young person. Find a nice, quiet, and calm space to talk. By talking about mental health with your young person, you can show them that it is okay to talk about feelings and emotions and not something to be ashamed of.

TOP TIP: When thinking about the space, driving in a car and not looking at the person will help them open up, or playing a game or doing a calm activity like painting.

Understanding: By talking about your mental health difficulties, you can help your young people make sense of any changes in yourself so they can know what is happening. Encourage your child to share their thoughts and feelings about what they've noticed or any concerns they may have. This can help provide understanding for them when seeing changes in your mood or behavior, which can alleviate confusion or fear.

TOP TIP: Naturally start to ask each day, "Have you noticed anything that's been worrying you lately?"

Show Empathy and Compassion: Sharing age-appropriate information with the young person about the things you are struggling with opens the lines of communication and can help foster empathy and compassion in your child. From here, it is more likely that your young person will develop a better understanding of what other people who are going through similar experiences.

TOP TIP: Give time and pause after each bit of information. Encourage the young person to ask questions.

Build Trust: Being open and honest about your mental health can strengthen the bond between you and your child. It shows them that they can trust you to be honest with them and that it's okay to talk about difficult topics.

TOP TIP: If you have had a bad day or your mood is low, openly show trust by letting them know, making sure they know they are not to blame.

Role-modelling: Sharing your experiences with managing your mental health can provide valuable insights for your child. They can learn coping strategies and healthy ways to deal with stress or difficult emotions by seeing how you are coping.

TOP TIP: Try mindfulness exercises together. Mindfulness is perfect for all ages and can be fun as well as relaxing and destressing.

ABOUT THE AUSTRALIAN KOOKABURRA KIDS FOUNDATION

The Australian Kookaburra Kids Foundation delivers services to young people (8-18) impacted by family mental illness with the aim of empowering them to build resilience lifelong knowledge and abilities to reach their potential. This is carried out through face-to face programs and online Connect sessions which are, fun, free, and run across Australia.

To find out more about our programs please visit our website: kookaburrakids.org.au

To refer a young person to take part in one of our innovative programs designed by qualified mental health clinicians, please visit: <https://kookaburrakids.org.au/get-involved/refer/>

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