



Having the conversation with young people about anxiety and depression

Are you worried about a young person and not sure what to say? Do you worry that you might make things worse? You want to help them, but not sure how? It all starts with a conversation.

Even if you aren't sure quite what to say, the important thing is that you say something. Let them know that you are concerned and why. They may be experiencing anxiety or depression, or they might be struggling with a personal issue. By starting a conversation and showing your concern and willingness to support them, you're giving them an opportunity to share what they are going through. This can make all the difference in ensuring they get any support they might need.

"It doesn't matter whether you sound articulate but just begin a conversation. Something that you believe will lead you somewhere, because I think the worst thing to do is to stand on the sideline and say nothing for fear of not getting it right."

- Paul, parent

It's sometimes hard to talk

Talking about thoughts and feelings can be difficult for young people. They might get angry when you ask if they are OK, or they might just say nothing. Young people sometimes find it hard to talk because they:

- think that they are alone and no one could understand what they're going through

- want privacy
- feel ashamed or embarrassed
- want independence
- feel like they won't be heard or believed
- have had negative experiences of talking about it in the past
- are feeling hopeless.

If you are the young person's parent, you probably have your own ideas, feelings and attitudes about what is going on, and these can influence how and what you say. Parents can have difficulty talking with young people because they are:

- not sure how to talk about things
- worried about the consequences or what they might find out
- thinking they need to appear strong
- worried about being rejected or feeling like they're not doing a good job as a parent
- not willing to accept anything is wrong.

Preparing for the conversation

- Choose the right time to talk. Choose a time when the young person is relaxed and unlikely to be distracted.
- Be natural, and try not to over-think it. Start by sharing your concern and see what happens.
- Be prepared for rejection. They might not want to talk when you do, so try again another time.

- Check your own emotions. The conversation will work best if you are relaxed, able to manage your emotions, and focused on how they are feeling and coping.

Approach the conversation in a realistic manner. You probably won't have all the right answers. You may say the wrong thing at times. But **you can** let them know that you care and want to help.

"You just have to pick the right time and have the conversation."

- Deanna, parent

Be yourself when raising the issue

"Be natural and whatever comes out is ok."

- Claire, parent

Be genuine and thoughtful, and say it in a way that is comfortable to you. And if what you say does not sound right, stop, acknowledge your mistake, and try again.

- Help them understand why you are concerned.
- Talk about what you have noticed – how they talk, how they interact with others or what they have been doing differently.
- Ask questions that help you learn more about how they feel, when they feel this way, and what might help them feel better. Be sure not to overwhelm them.

- Take it slowly and think about their answers. Let them guide your conversation.

Things you could say

- “I am really worried because you seem to be so sad and tired lately. Do you want to talk about it? Has something happened?”
- “I hope you don’t mind me asking you about this – I really want to understand how things are for you. Please tell me if I am asking too many questions.”
- “I need to know you are safe but I don’t need to know everything. How can we do this?”

“If you’ve got a worry or a concern, just realise that you’re going to have to raise it on many occasions before you get a coherent response.”

- Andrew Fuller, Psychologist

Be a good listener – try to understand

Being a good listener means taking the time to try to understand what the young person is saying. It’s about listening to their story with curiosity and concern, and trying not to jump in to offer solutions. Sometimes just sitting quietly gives them time to work out how to express their feelings.

As parents, we want to fix things for our children, so sitting quietly and waiting is not always easy. But young people want to feel some control over the conversation, and what happens next.

“Leave a little pause and they may well start to talk.”

- Bruce, parent

- At different times in the conversation reflect back on what you have heard to make sure you are beginning to understand their experience.
- Be careful not to make assumptions about how they feel and why.

- Try to understand their reaction.
 - If they are reluctant to talk, try to understand why and help them to feel at ease.
 - If they feel overwhelmed, reassure them that together you can find a way through.
 - Appreciate what they share with you, no matter how small. It can take courage for a young person to talk about what they are feeling; especially if they don’t understand it themselves.
 - If the young person is emotional, sit with them, offer a tissue, and let them know that crying is OK.
- Approach the conversation knowing that this might be the first of many. You don’t have to know everything after the first conversation; sometimes it may take a while to fully understand what is going on.
- Let them know that it is really important that they talk about how they feel; it’s part of learning to cope and deal with difficult experiences.

Things to keep in mind when talking to young people about anxiety and depression

If a young person has anxiety or depression, it will probably affect the way they think about things. They are more likely to approach situations negatively, believing nothing much can change or that things are hopeless. Being terribly anxious and worried can also get in the way of finding solutions. If the young person feels this way, they may need:

- encouragement to explore options for help
- reassurance that things will be OK
- to focus on small steps and achievements.

Be supportive

“We will care for you no matter what, no matter what direction you take, we will support you.”

- Paul, parent

Ask them how you can help

- Ask the young person what you can do to help. Suggest a few options; some that support them emotionally (being available to listen, offering reassurance), others that offer practical help (help with homework or getting to a part time job).
- Try to find the balance between helping them and encouraging their independence.
- Provide information about depression and anxiety and the types of help that are available. Find more information at youthbeyondblue.com
- Encourage them to think about their options for what they might do to feel better.
- Acknowledge that it might be hard to try new things at the moment but encourage them to try and see whether it makes them feel any differently.
- Regularly check in with the young person about the help you are offering and if it is still useful.
- Respect their privacy. Be clear that you will not tell others unless they want you to, or if you are worried that they are in danger. Talk with them about the benefits of telling some people, such as getting more support.
- Let them know that professional help is confidential and easy to access. Offer to help them find the right services when they are ready.

Things you could say

- “You have felt this way for a while now and it has not improved – it might be helpful to see someone about it?”
- “Have you thought about getting some help, we could find information together if you like.”
- “We all need extra help managing our emotions at times, maybe it’s time you saw someone?”
- “I hear there are some good online support services – would that be helpful?”
- “I don’t feel like I am helping enough, are there some other people that might be helpful to get involved?”



Help to cope with setbacks

Listen, be patient, and encourage them to keep trying. Let them know that setbacks are normal, not a sign that they have failed. Provide reassurance and highlight achievements, even the small ones.

Things you could say

- “You have done really well coping over the last few weeks. Have you noticed that things have gone a bit better?”
- “This is a setback but would it help to try to focus on tomorrow? What can you do to feel a bit better?”
- “You handled that problem really well – so differently to how things would have been a few months ago.”

Check they are safe

If they are at risk of hurting themselves or someone else you need to talk about it. If you are not sure, ask. Talking about suicide can help you understand what level of support the young person needs; it does not make a person think about suicide. Young people generally appreciate your honesty and openness.

- **If they have made plans to end their life you need to act immediately. Call emergency services (triple zero – 000), contact your doctor or mental health crisis service, or go with the person to your local hospital emergency department.**

- If they have had suicidal thoughts but have not made plans, or you are not sure about their safety, encourage them to get help from their local GP, youth mental health services, *beyondblue* Support Service or Lifeline (13 11 14). They, or you, can have a confidential conversation with a trained professional in person or over the phone to make a plan to keep them safe and supported. You don't have to face this situation alone.

Things you could say

- “Sometimes when people are feeling like this they think about ending their lives, have you ever had those thoughts?”
- “Have you thought about how and when?”
- “I know things are tough at the moment but we can find some ways to help you – can we call someone together to talk about your options?”

“It is always better to ask rather than not to ask.”

- Andrew Fuller, Psychologist

Make a plan together

See this as a starting point from which more conversations will follow. What other conversations would be useful to have?

- Try to go away from the conversation with a plan that you have made together. The plan might be to talk about it again later, collect some more information or to contact a health service together. Or the young person might choose to look at the e-counselling options available and let you know how they go.
- Encourage the young person to do something to refocus their thinking onto more positive or enjoyable experiences when the conversation ends.
- Thank them for sharing their story with you. This may not have been easy for them.

If you are not sure about how to help the young person, seek advice from a health professional or call the *beyondblue* Support Service on **1300 22 4636**.

Things you could say

- “Have you thought about what you want to do now? Where do we go from here?”
- “Would it help if we talked again sometime, maybe we could talk about how I can help you?”
- “You have a lot going on at the moment, thanks so much for sharing your experiences with me. I know that that can be really hard to do.”

Looking after yourself

Worrying about a young person you care about can be exhausting so make sure you look after yourself too. Think about how you can relax after a difficult conversation, for example by listening to music, exercising or doing something else that you enjoy. It also might be helpful to see a professional yourself to help talk things through and debrief.

When they don't want help

There will be times when young people say they do not need or want help, and this could be for a range of reasons. It might be because a previous experience of getting help didn't go very well, or because they don't know what to expect. Talking openly about these concerns can help.

- You don't always have to agree, but should always try to be calm and considerate in what you say.
- Help them learn more about what getting help is really like. There is a lot of information online about how services work and what to expect.
- Help them to develop their confidence to be able to talk about difficult things.
- Respect their right not to seek help, but keep trying to talk to them about it. Point out that getting help is a sign of courage and determination to make a change.
- Reassure them that a lot of people face challenges; they are not alone.
- Maintain the relationship that you have and keep supporting them.

Things you could say

- "I guess I see it differently but I can see that this really upsets you, what do you think might help?"
- "I see it in a different way, can I tell you what I noticed?"
- "I understand that you don't want any more help at the moment but if things don't improve we should talk about it again."

"It's persevering, persevering, persevering, and keep reinforcing that I'm here for you, I want to listen, I want to help."

- Marion, parent



Our lives are full of conversations. It is how we share experiences, learn from each other, offer support and let others know how we feel. Don't underestimate your ability to ask questions, listen and talk about the things that really matter to a young person.

You don't need to have all the answers, you just need to be willing to talk. Start your conversation and offer support; you can work on solutions together.

Where to find more information

beyondblue

www.beyondblue.org.au

Learn more about anxiety and depression, or talk it through with our Support Service.

☎ 1300 22 4636

✉ Email or 💬 chat to us online at www.beyondblue.org.au/getsupport

Head to Health

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