

Mental Health Awareness Week (15th to 21st May)

How do I know if someone has a mental health problem?

Sometimes it will seem obvious when someone is going through a hard time, but there is no simple way of knowing if they have a mental health problem. Although certain symptoms are common with specific mental health problems, no two people behave the same way when unwell. You may notice changes in their behaviour or mood if you know the person well. Talking to someone is often the first step when you know they are having a hard time. This way, you can find out what is troubling them and what you can do to help.

Eight tips for talking about mental health

1. **Set time aside with no distractions**

It is important to provide an open and non-judgemental space with no distractions.

2. **Let them share as much or as little as they want to**

Let them lead the discussion at their own pace. Don't pressure them to tell you anything they aren't ready to talk about. Talking can take a lot of trust and courage. You might be the first person they have been able to talk to about this.

3. **Don't try to diagnose or second guess their feelings**

You probably aren't a medical expert, and while you may be happy to talk and offer support, you aren't a trained counsellor. Try not to make assumptions about what is wrong or jump in too quickly with your own diagnosis or solutions.

4. **Keep questions open ended**

Say, "Why don't you tell me how you are feeling?" rather than "I can see you are feeling very low". Try to keep your language neutral. Give the person time to answer and try not to grill them with too many questions.

5. **Talk about self-care**

Discuss ways of de-stressing or practising self-care and ask if they find anything helpful. Exercising, having a healthy diet and getting a good night's sleep can help protect mental health and sustain wellbeing.

6. **Listen carefully to what they tell you**

Repeat what they have said back to them to ensure you have understood it. You don't have to agree with what they are saying, but by showing you understand how they feel, you are letting them know you respect their feelings.

7. **Offer them help in seeking professional support and provide information on ways to do this**

You might want to offer to go to the GP with them or help them talk to a friend or family member. Try not to take control and allow them to make decisions.

8. **Know your limits**

You will have your own limits on the support that you can provide. And it's important to take care of yourself too. Give yourself time to rest and process what they have told you or what's happened. Try to help them create a support network of other friends, relatives and mental health professionals who can help them too.

