



MENTAL HEALTH CONVERSATION STARTERS

Helping Parents, Caregivers, and School Staff



MHANYS
Mental Health Association
in New York State



School Mental Health
Resource  Training Center

Asking someone about their emotional or mental wellness can be awkward.

*How will they respond? What if they don't want to talk about it?
What if they end up getting upset with me?*

These, and other concerns, are typical. Most people were raised to consider discussions about mental health as intrusive, taboo or even shameful. As our society continues to recognize that good mental health is part of overall health and wellness, we see more and more people talking openly and honestly about their mental health and wellbeing. In fact, a recent 4-H study¹ reported that over 80% of teens want more honest conversations about mental health.

To help parents, caregivers and school staff start a conversation about student emotional wellbeing, the School Mental Health Resource and Training Center has created **Mental Health Conversation Starters**. This toolkit provides sample prompts for a variety of situations or concerns as well as tips on how to discuss good mental health habits in students and how to create a safe, caring and age-appropriate atmosphere for ongoing conversation and dialogue with children and youth.

Exploratory

Oftentimes we don't know (or can't observe) what is going on with a student, but our gut tells us something is off. Instead of asking a yes/no question ("Are you okay?"), start a conversation that invites your child to share beyond a one-word answer.

- "It seems like something's up. Let's talk about what's going on."
- "I've noticed you've been down lately. What's going on?"
- "Seems like you haven't been yourself lately. What's up?"
- "You don't seem as _____ as you usually are. I'd like to help if I can."
- "No matter what you're going through, I'm here for you."
- "This might be awkward, but I'd like to know if you're really alright."
- "I haven't heard you laugh (seen you smile) in a while. Is everything okay?"
- "I'm worried about you and would like to know what's going on so I can help."

Not all conversation starters need to be questions – many times a caring statement and a moment of silence is all it takes for someone to begin sharing. It is important to remember that sometimes it takes a few attempts before a child might open up and share. [Seize The Awkward](#)² has more information and resources that can be used at home, in the classroom and shared with students to support each other.



Observational

When noticing a change in behavior, it's important to focus on the reason or emotion behind the action rather than the action itself. Avoid asking "Why are you (not) _____?" and, instead, state what you are noticing and what might be behind the behavior.

- "I've noticed..."
- "It seems like ..."
- "Have you noticed..."
- "Tell me how [specific behavior] makes you feel."
- "I haven't seen you [specific behavior] lately. Is everything okay?"

For example:

- "I've noticed that you seem more anxious on Sunday nights. What's going on?"
- "Have you noticed that you're not eating all of your dinner lately? I wonder if something is bothering you."
- "I haven't seen you playing basketball like you used to. What's up?"

When we ask about a behavior in a non-judgmental way that focuses on the reason or cause, children are less likely to become defensive – avoiding the typical "good/bad" behavior dynamic and demonstrating concern and care.

Normalizing The Conversation

Imagine if questions and conversations about mental health and wellness were as common as “How was your weekend?” or “Did you sleep alright?” By intentionally incorporating emotional health and wellness into daily life, we continue to chip away at the stigma associated with talking about mental health.

In the classroom teachers can demonstrate care, empathy and support by asking students about what they need and to be more self-aware:

- “What’s something that would make you feel more comfortable in my classroom?”
- “Is there anything that helps you focus while in class?”
- “How will I know when you need extra support?”
- “What does it look like when you need to take a break?”

In the home parents and caregivers can let their children know that their emotional health and wellness matters by regularly asking:

- “Tell me something that surprised you about your day in school”
- “What emotion did you feel the most today?”
- “Have you felt [emotion] in the past week?”
- “It seems like you are [emotion] right now. Let’s talk about it.”

Celebrate Good Mental Health Habits

Mental health, like physical health, exists on a continuum – from distress and pain to feeling great and energized. When we only talk about emotions that are difficult or troubling, we unintentionally reinforce negative stigma. Instead, be on the lookout for ways that students are practicing good mental health and wellness skills and talk about it with them.

For example:

- “Wow! You really handled that stressful situation well. How did you do it?”
- “You seem really upbeat today. What are you happy about?”
- “I don’t know many people that could have handled _____ like you did. What’s your secret?”
- “That _____ was rough but you made it through. What skills did you use?”²



Available at mentalhealthEDnys.org/back-to-school

Sources

¹<https://4-h.org/about/blog/how-teens-are-coping-with-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

²<https://seizetheawkward.org/>

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