



# HOW TO TALK TO YOUNG PEOPLE ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH

A guide for parents, caregivers and adults who work with people under the age of 18

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As adults who care for and work with young people, you may be among the first people to notice concerning changes in behavior or emotional wellbeing. If you do, it's time to start a conversation.

**Use these five steps to learn to talk with young people about their mental health, maintain privacy, build trust, and make connections to mental health providers.**

## 1 Ask the young person about their experiences and feelings — and offer them time and space to share

Providing young people with a safe, affirming, and private space in which to share their feelings can be essential to their mental health. This is important for all young people, and especially if you notice significant changes in behavior, withdrawal from activities, or other signs of emotional distress.

Throughout the conversation, listen actively—use non-judgmental language. Supportive communication strategies, like the tips shared below, can help facilitate a successful conversation.

## **TIPS FOR SUPPORTIVE COMMUNICATION:**

- **To start the conversation:**
  - Ask the young person if it is okay to check in with them at this time. If they say no, ask if there is another time or place they would prefer to talk
  - Set up a private time/space to speak with the young person
- **During your conversation:**
  - Use a calm tone of voice, a non-threatening stance, and be patient
  - Use “I” statements, like “I think” or “I wonder if,” rather than “you should” statements
  - Affirm experiences and identities: Use correct names and gender pronouns. If you don’t know, respectfully ask, “What are your preferred pronouns?”
  - Don’t use negative labels or judging language
  - Be aware of and consciously resist your personal biases and assumptions
  - Let young people guide the conversation and ask them to “tell you more”
- **To close the conversation:**
  - Ask how you can help and offer options
  - Encourage the young person to access mental health resources
  - Ask the young person if there are other adults they would rather talk with, such as someone who shares their cultural, racial, or gender identity
  - Reassure the young person that they are not alone. It is common for young people to experience stress and intense emotions. It’s part of being human



### **What to say:**

- “Lately, I’ve noticed that you are not as actively involved in [activity] as you were before. Can we talk about what’s changed for you recently?”
- “I wanted to check-in with you to talk about what’s on your mind. This past year has been hard and I can see you are carrying a lot. Would you be willing to share with me how you’re feeling?”

## 2 Share information with appropriate colleagues, supervisors, and mental health professionals

When speaking with young people about mental health, never promise to keep secrets. Instead, let them know that you may need to disclose information to keep the young person and those around them safe. As you listen, repeat and ask for confirmation that you are understanding it correctly, to ensure you can communicate their feelings and experiences accurately.

### **KNOW WHO TO TALK TO:**

- Always contact a mental health professional if a young person reports wanting to hurt themselves or someone else. Do not leave the young person alone, and immediately share this information with the appropriate colleagues and supervisors.
- If you are unsure whether the young person should be referred to a mental health professional, contact **1-888-NYC-WELL (1-888-692-9355)** for guidance from a professional
- If you suspect abuse or neglect, discuss this with a supervisor and engage a mental health professional for consultation about next steps to help the young person. If you are a mandated reporter, you have additional reporting requirements in a case of suspected abuse or neglect. Familiarize yourself with these requirements at [nysmandatedreporter.org](http://nysmandatedreporter.org).<sup>1</sup>

### **FOR URGENT OR EMERGENCY SUPPORT:**

If a young person shares something that raises cause for alarm, immediately tell the supervisor on site and remain with the young person until a mental health professional arrives to assess the situation.

For urgent mental health support, call **1-888-NYC-WELL (1-888-692-9355)**. If needed, mobile crisis teams can arrive within a couple hours to assess the situation and provide care.

In case of a life threatening emergency, contact 911 immediately. Note that requesting a police presence may unintentionally exacerbate the situation, particularly for young people of color.

### **When to consider additional mental health support<sup>2</sup>:**

- A person alludes to wanting to die or talks openly of suicide
- A person seems to be socially isolating and withdrawn, beyond what is required by social distancing
- A person is experiencing delusions
- A person does not seem to know who they are, where they are, or does not know the time, day, month, or year
- You become aware of over-reliance on alcohol or drugs
- You see the person engaging in significant behavior that puts themselves or others in danger
- You realize the problem is beyond your capability or level of training to address

#### **What to say:**

- “Thank you for sharing. I know that was hard to share and I appreciate you opening up to me. I heard you say [repeat concern raised by youth]. Is that right?”
- “Our next step here is to bring in the right support. Because of concerns for your safety, I need to talk with a supervisor to share what we have discussed. I am going to call [name of colleague] and ask that they join us.”
- “Thank you for sharing that you [repeat concern raised by youth]. What you shared is important, and requires us to bring in extra support to make sure you are safe.”

### **3 Share your concerns and gain caregiver consent**

Parents and caregivers are essential partners in promoting mental health and wellness, mitigating mental health challenges and addressing mental health crises. Approach them with compassion, an open mind, and a calm demeanor. If the young person is under the age of 18<sup>3</sup>, there are cases where you may need to get a caregiver’s consent to connect the young person to a mental health provider.

## **GETTING CONSENT:**

Engage caregivers in conversations about mental health referrals whenever possible. Speak with a supervisor about the appropriate process for obtaining consent to make a referral.

When possible, include the young person in conversations about connecting to a mental health provider.

### **Here's what you need to know:**

- Consent must be documented in writing – this could be through a signed form or an email confirmation.
- If consent was given verbally, document the date and time of consent, and ask the caregiver to follow up in writing.
- You can also send an email and ask the caregiver to reply and confirm consent.
- Your organization may have specific protocols for documenting consent, so be sure to ask your supervisor for guidance.

### **What to say:**

- “I am calling to talk about [young person’s name]. Don’t worry, [young person’s name] is not in trouble and they are safe. Until a few weeks ago, [young person’s name] had been an active participant and held great relationships with program staff and peers. Recently, we have noticed a change in mood and energy level. [Young person’s name] has been withdrawn and has stopped participating in our activities. Have you noticed any changes at home?”
- “I spoke with [young person’s name] and they shared that they have been feeling stressed. In similar situations with other young people, I’ve found that connecting them with a provider who can help them understand how they are feeling has been helpful.”
- “Would you like me to connect you and [young person’s name] to a mental health provider? If you like, with your consent, I will make the call to a mental health provider, let them know what we talked about today, and help make an appointment for [young person’s name.] If you prefer, you can contact the provider directly.”

## Refer to a mental health provider

If you determine that the young person could benefit from additional support and have received caregiver consent, tell them that you have received permission to refer them to a provider. If you are unsure whether the young person should be referred, contact **1-888-NYC-WELL (1-888-692-9355)** for guidance from a professional.

Remind the young person that speaking to a mental health professional can help. Together the adult and the youth should determine whether the next steps should include additional support and, if so, identify potential sources of that support. Make sure the young person knows they are not being dismissed or punished, and that you will continue to be there for them.

### **HOW TO FIND A PROVIDER AND MAKE A REFERRAL:**

To identify a provider, call **1-888-NYC-WELL (1-888-692-9355)** or visit [nyc.gov/nycwell](http://nyc.gov/nycwell).

Once you've identified a provider, make the connection to the young person and their caregiver. Many organizations will ask for the caregiver's contact information and a description of the behavior that has led to the referral. Remember, only share personal information with the mental health provider if you have obtained and documented appropriate consent. Some providers will ask that the caregiver contact them directly. If so, thank the provider for taking your referral, let them know you will be giving their contact information to the family right away and to expect their call.

### **The following types of information are helpful to share:**

- Area of concern or presenting problem
- Specific observable behaviors
- Strengths and/or interests
- Timeline related to the area of concern or presenting problem.



### What to say:

- “I want to follow up on our last conversation. I am so glad you told me about how you’ve been feeling. I would like to introduce you to [provider], who can help you get through this. How would you like to be introduced?”
- “[Provider] might be able to help you think of ways to handle [name of feeling expressed by youth]. The good thing about talking to [provider] is that they know best how to help you handle this type of feeling and are a good listener, so you can just let go and be yourself.”

## 5 Keep the conversation going

Because of the relationship you have built, the young person may continue checking in with you. Following up after a referral shows the young person that you are interested in and committed to their wellbeing.



### What to say:

- “Thank you for talking to me the other day about how you are feeling. Last time we spoke, I shared information about [name of counselor/name of provider]. Were you able to talk to them? Have they been able to support you?”
- “I wanted to check-in and see how you are since we last spoke and connected you to [name of counselor/name of provider]. Healing is hard and I know it was hard for you to share. I want you to know that I am here to support you. If you don’t mind sharing, how has your work with [name of counselor/name of provider] been going?”

## Endnotes

1 <https://www.nysmandatedreporter.org/MandatedReporters.aspx>

2 <https://mentalhealth.cityofnewyork.us/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/062920-WeekendofFaithToolkit-digital-1.pdf>

3 <https://www.health.ny.gov/professionals/ems/policy/99-09.htm>

# RESOURCES

Scan the QR codes below for additional mental health resources and toolkits that can help you and the young people you work with:

Find apps and online tools to help manage health and emotional wellbeing  
[nycwell.cityofnewyork.us/en/app-library](http://nycwell.cityofnewyork.us/en/app-library)

Download guides to continue learning about mental health resources:

COVID-19 Mental Health Guide for Children, Teens and Young Adults:



[mentalhealth.cityofnewyork.us/  
resource-guides-toolkits/resource-guides/  
covid-19-guide-to-mental-health-resources-for-  
children-teens-young-adults](http://mentalhealth.cityofnewyork.us/resource-guides-toolkits/resource-guides/covid-19-guide-to-mental-health-resources-for-children-teens-young-adults)

COVID-19 Mental Health Services for Young People:



[mentalhealth.cityofnewyork.us/resource-guides-  
toolkits/resource-guides/ocmh-covid-19-mental-  
health-services-for-young-people](http://mentalhealth.cityofnewyork.us/resource-guides-toolkits/resource-guides/ocmh-covid-19-mental-health-services-for-young-people)

How to help someone who needs mental healthcare:



[mentalhealth.cityofnewyork.us/how-to-help](http://mentalhealth.cityofnewyork.us/how-to-help)

Mental health support New Yorkers can access while staying home:



[mentalhealth.cityofnewyork.us/mental\\_health\\_  
support\\_while\\_home](http://mentalhealth.cityofnewyork.us/mental_health_support_while_home)