

How to have conversations around mental health

An important part of the champion's role is having positive conversations about mental health with colleagues, participants and people in the local community.

Starting a conversation is a powerful way to challenge mental health stigma and help people to think about their own perceptions and the perceptions of others. **Remember, champions don't need to be mental health experts to talk about mental health and challenge stigma.**

Positive conversations may lead to talking to someone about their mental health, so it is important that champions can manage this situation effectively, and that they know how to end these conversations when required. The guidance in this section can help.

Managing conversations

- Find a quiet place with an informal atmosphere, such as a café. A conversation about mental health shouldn't feel like a formal interview.
- Actively listen to the person by giving them your undivided attention. Leave any questions or comments until the person has finished, so you don't interrupt them.
- Once someone knows they're being given the space and time to talk, they're more likely to open up. If someone approaches you wanting to talk, it may not be possible for you to give them the time they need there and then. Instead, show them you recognise that they've taken a positive step by speaking to you, explain why you can't talk now and arrange a better time to have the conversation. If they are in urgent need of help, be sure to signpost them to support.
- Reflecting the words they've used can encourage them to open up more.
- Use empathetic statements such as: "I appreciate this must be difficult for you...".
- Avoid clichés. Comments like "pull yourself together" or "you're just having a bad day" are unhelpful.
- Remind them that mental health problems are more common than people think, and that they can affect anyone at any time.
- Avoid asking too many questions, especially closed questions (which require a 'yes' or 'no' answer) and those that begin with the word 'why.' Ask open questions to invite a more detailed response:
 - Can you describe how you're feeling?
 - How do you look after yourself?
 - What support do you have in place?
- Reassure them that it's positive that they want to talk about their experience, and that they've acknowledged they want support (if this is the case).

- Ask if they're aware of sources of support, and signpost them to relevant information and help. It may be helpful to ask "What would you like to happen in this situation?" This will help to empower and encourage them to take the course of action that seems right to them. Be clear about what you can do, as well as what you can't,
- The important thing is to listen rather than give advice – the individual needs to be able to act for themselves. Signpost them to sources of support, rather than telling them what you think is best.

Important note

If someone needs urgent medical attention due to their mental health, direct them to their GP, Accident & Emergency at their nearest hospital, or the Samaritans on 116 123, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Alternatively, the yellow box at the top of every page on the Mind website will help direct people appropriately.

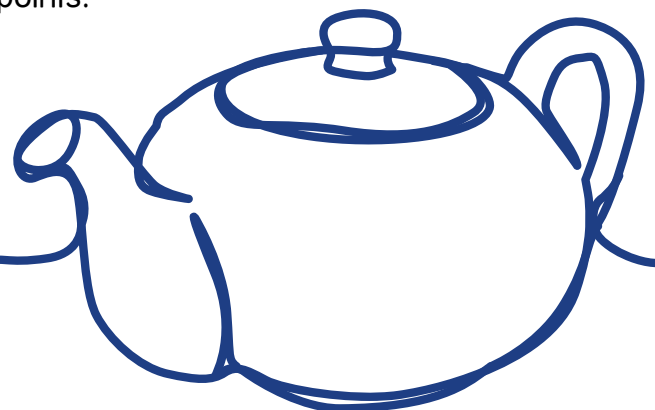
Starting conversations

Sometimes starting a conversation about mental health is the hardest task, and it's important not to be discouraged by negative experiences.

You may want to practice or role play conversations with a close friend or family member until you become more comfortable. It's important to know your own boundaries and be clear on what personal experiences you're happy to reference in conversation.

Here are some tips to help start conversations:

- Ask someone how they are doing or feeling. Encourage them to engage with an open question focused on them and their wellbeing.
- Use your own personal experiences as a conversation starting point. Be clear on what you're happy to share, before you get started.
- Talk about how you maintain personal wellbeing, relax or de-stress (for example, how you use sport or physical activity as part of your daily or weekly routine).
- Use topical news stories to highlight interesting points.



Closing conversations about mental health

Closing conversations effectively helps to reassure the participant that their thoughts and feelings have been listened to, and helps to clarify next steps.

- Sometimes conversations will come to a natural end. If this doesn't happen, provide a gentle indication that the conversation needs to come to an end. You could say something like: "It's been good to talk. We've covered a lot and we will have to wrap up soon because I have another session," or something similar.
- Summarise the conversation and anything you've both agreed to do. For example: "You've told me you're going to speak to your GP about how you're feeling, and I will email you details of your local Mind."
- Ask practical questions such as "Will someone be there when you get home?" or "Is there a friend you can go and see?"
- Offering a listening ear and showing your acceptance, warmth and regard can go a long way to help someone. It may not be possible to get a clear idea of the next steps they'll take as a result of talking to you. Ending the conversation by inviting them to take some time to reflect on what you've discussed, and to consider what they may want to do next could be the best way to bring the conversation to a close, especially if you feel there's nothing more you can say at that time.

If you feel it would be helpful, that it's appropriate within the boundaries of your role, and that you're able to commit to giving more of your time in this way, you may want to arrange another time to meet and talk.

