

A Series of Little Conversations

Raising children is hard. Whether you parent your biological children, you are a foster or adoptive parent, or are a legal guardian or caregiver for a child in your life, raising them is both a privilege and a challenge. It can be full of worry and guilt because the kids in our lives require a lot from us on so many levels. And sometimes worry comes from not knowing how they are *actually* doing. It's not always easy to tell if they are having a difficult mental health experience. It can be hard to know how to best be there for them.

If you are feeling concerned about your child's mental health status and you aren't sure how to approach the **big** conversations, we want to remind you that more often than not, discussing mental health with the child or teen in your life is really just ***a series of little conversations.***

There are moments where these little conversations can organically arise: car rides, waiting rooms, on the sidelines at a sporting event, in checkout lines, or when you're the first ones up or last ones awake on the weekend. There *is* time to talk about mental health. And when those moments present, consider taking time to check in with your kid.

Talking about mental health doesn't have to feel like one big, scary conversation.

To help get you started, we've created a guide in the form of a series of little conversations that you can use to create space and embrace chats about mental health with your kid. Each topic features advice on how you can approach conversations about mental health and a few prompts you can use to start connecting with your teen.

You can use these prompts as table talk questions at meals, conversation starters to ask while in the car, etc. Another great way to use these prompts, especially if your child or teen might not feel super open, is to have a shared journal where you can both write your responses in your own time.

And at the end of the day, parents and caregivers, remember that you are human too. It can be difficult to balance your own mental health needs with those of your children. It's important to take care of yourself so you can support your family as well. We encourage you to give yourself grace. There is no user manual for raising kids. It takes time to find what works, and you don't have to know everything about mental health to talk about it. Whatever way you decide to have these conversations, if there is ever a question you can't answer, it's OK to say, "I don't know, but I can try and find out." More than anything, let your kids know that these kinds of conversations can happen and are worth having.

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More often than not, when people have something heavy on their minds, it can be difficult to know how to get it out or where to begin. When caring for our kids' mental health, it is important to create a safe space so that these conversations can happen. Similar to the way that new parents begin "baby-proofing" the living space when a baby is learning to crawl and walk, we need to create a safe environment where our kids can open up and explore how they are *really* feeling. Just as we might witness our kids stumble around while they figure out how their bodies work, we might witness our teens struggling to articulate what they are feeling or thinking. But the space that we create will make a difference in whether or not they can get up and try again. Oftentimes this means paying attention to timing and what your kid may be feeling on a particular day. It also means paying attention to your own needs, thoughts, and obligations so that you can truly be available to listen. A safe space shouldn't open up with an intense question or an agenda, but instead a simple invitation. Start small. Practice active listening.

Talking Prompts:

- *If you could plan an afternoon to hang out, just you and me, what would you plan to do?*
- *What is your favorite time of day and why?*
- *What would you like me to know about you? What would you like to know about me?*
- *If you could make the house rules for the day, what would they look like?*
- *If you could make your personal space feel cozy, what would you add?*

Along with creating a safe space to open up, a teen needs to feel as though they can talk about anything. So even before opening the door to talk about mental health, start by simply talking to your teen. It doesn't have to be about anything important. It can be silly. It can be fun. Talk about their favorite book series. Talk about that ridiculous TV show. Talk about things that aren't heavy. Ask those "food for thought" or low-stakes questions. The things that won't make or break their day. Just talk. What better way to make someone feel comfortable enough to eventually talk about mental health than by starting with the simple things?

And remember, when you are doing this, put all devices away. Put the phone down and close the laptop. Give your full attention to the conversation. We know today's teens are typically "plugged in" and on their own devices, but while they might find connections and conversations online, it can disconnect them from the people around them in real-time. To encourage presence within the conversations, we all should put our devices away so that we can make eye contact and engage fully.

The thick of those teen years is tough for both caregivers and kids. But in the long haul, connecting with them on the silly or chill stuff might make them feel more comfortable to open up about the important stuff, like mental health! Be patient and lay the groundwork for those deeper connections later on.

Talking Prompts:

- *If you could be friends with a character from any TV show or movie, who would it be?*
- *What is a song/band you tell people is your favorite song/band? What do you love about it/them the most?*
- *If you were a character in a video game, where would be a fun place or series of places to do a parkour-style run?*
- *If you could live in a house in the mountains or a house by the sea, which would you choose and why?*
- *Name the most random thing you have ever witnessed in public.*

Sometimes kids and teens can find it hard to articulate exactly what they are thinking and/or feeling. Speaking out loud about what they feel inside can be very new and uncertain (the same can be true for adults!). Encourage them to find a way to describe their feelings. It doesn't have to be clinical or even make sense. It can be a sound, a drawing, or a movement. Do their feelings feel big or expansive? Does the feeling seem small? What color would they describe the feeling as? Feelings can be complicated, intense, and confusing, but try to encourage honesty in the moment and allow the feelings to materialize. And while it's important to hold this space for feelings to develop, it's equally important to make sure that the expression of those feelings is both safe for your kid and you, so communicate boundaries accordingly.

For inspiration, you can check out our [What Are You Feeling? Activity](#) featured on our [Middle School Resource Page](#)!

Talking Prompts:

- *What are you feeling?*
- *What is your body telling you?*
- *What can we do about it?*
- *What color does your feeling look like?*
- *If you could describe what you're feeling with any word, what would it be?*

[“Depression Is Not A Bad Word”](#) written by Anna Gayle asks the question: “If so many of us are hurting, why aren’t we talking about it?” Much of the time, stigma or fear gets in the way of talking about mental health. We treat it like we’re saying a bad word. We’re afraid that if we talk about it it might become real or we will have to come to terms with the reality that it exists.

While it might feel like talking about mental health could cause an individual to *begin* struggling, research shows that some teens are already experiencing mental health issues. The [CDC](#) reported in 2021 that “more than four in ten (42%) students felt persistently sad or hopeless and nearly one-third (29%) experienced poor mental health.” So, chances are that having a conversation about mental health will not spark a new idea about it in their mind, as there is a possibility that they’ve already had these thoughts. When we let stigma and fear get in the way of those conversations, teens might lose an opportunity to get the help and support they need.

It doesn’t have to be this way. When we treat talking about mental health like a normal conversation, it permits us to be honest, to be open, and to be heard. In her blog, Anna says, “There is so much power in talking about the things no one talks about. So many people are suffering in silence, simply because they’ve never been given permission to voice the things they’re going through. And sometimes if we are able to share our own story, we can help someone else understand theirs.” When we stop treating mental health terms like bad words, stigma starts to dissipate.

There are a lot of parents and caregivers who fear that asking direct questions about their child’s mental health could cause them to occur or increase in frequency or intensity. It’s courageous to open the door to the topic sooner rather than later. The CDC shares that, “The good news is that teens are resilient, and we know what works to support their mental health: feeling [connected](#) to school and family.” Having these discussions can help teens feel supported in their mental health journeys and reduce the stigma around mental health.

Talking Prompts:

- *If you could capture your self/feelings/mood(s) in a song, what would it be?*
- *What makes your day bright? What makes it difficult?*
- *What makes you feel most afraid? When do you feel most joyful?*
- *What makes your stress levels rise? What is your favorite way to release stress?*
- *Do you have any friends or people you know who talk about what they’re feeling? If so, how do you feel when they discuss those things with you?*

All of us carry things under the surface that people can't see. The psychology community has used the powerful image of an iceberg to illustrate the levels of the conscious and unconscious mind. The conscious mind is the part of the iceberg that is above the water that you can see, and the unconscious mind is the part of the iceberg that is below the surface. This analogy is used to show that not everything people experience is immediately obvious to them at the surface level. Similarly, the image of the iceberg can represent our kids: what we see at the surface level and all the things they internalize being what lies beneath. We know that kids carry a lot more than they let on. For example, you might see a teen who is involved in many extracurricular activities, taking honors classes, and trying to balance everything. But what you might not see below the surface is a teen who is struggling to manage their time, get good sleep, keep up with their school work, and so much more. And many teens won't always let others in on those struggles. What's going on below the surface might be the reason they are distant or feeling anxious.

This is why it is essential to dive a bit deeper with our kids. And to get at the heart of what our kids *don't* say, we need to practice asking the right questions, while at the same time being aware of our responses. If and when those deeper feelings and attitudes rise to the surface and are uncovered, we as parents and caregivers need to treat them with care, as we are being entrusted with something that was once kept out of our sightline. Be careful not to prod or push with your questioning. And if you or your kid find that face-to-face conversations are just too raw/intimate/difficult/frustrating or maybe one or both of you process things better in your head, check out the Dual-Use Journal section on page 11 for a different approach.

Talking Prompts:

- *If you and I could trade places for a day, what would you do if you were me? What do you think I would do if I were you?*
- *I feel _____ when you _____.*
- *What do you most need to hear?*
- *Is there a part of a movie or show that describes what you are experiencing?*
- *What after-school activity is your favorite to do? Which is the hardest to do?*

The important thing to remember in connecting with your kid about mental health is that you're not aiming to have a one-time big conversation about it all. It focuses on the fact that the conversations you have can be small and simple, and that they will hopefully become a series of conversations that will happen over time. Checking in with your kid about their mental health is an ongoing process. There might be times when life gets hectic and you don't get a chance to check in for a while and that's OK. But practice returning to the conversations when you can. Be available and open if or when your teen comes to you, or if you can't be, plan a time for later. And remember to be intentional about being present. Put the distractions away and be in the moment for these interactions.

On the next few pages, we have some additional topics, resources, readings, and content that you can use to keep the conversations going!

Tweens and teens alike are at a crucial time in their mental development where a lot is changing. In these years, our kids consider heavily the opinions of others around them, namely their peers. There is a lot of uncertainty and comparison, and as a result, low self-esteem. This is where you come in! There are many opportunities to validate your kid right where they are and spend time focusing on the positive rather than the things you wish they'd do differently. Identify the things they are doing well and celebrate them. Help them discover their uniqueness as a strength. Your approval is still important to them even if they never vocalize it.

Talking Prompts:

- *What is a dream you have for yourself?*
- *What do you like about yourself (both external and internal)?*
- *What do you think your strengths are?*

Not sure where to start? Here is a fun list of low-stakes talk topics to get you started! Feel free to modify them to fit your and your teen's interests. Remember that the initial connection should be light. You're trying to just begin building a bridge of communication. Start simple and fun.

1. A perfect meal that ticks all the boxes. Go!
2. Design a head-to-toe outfit for me (that I might actually wear) and I'll design one for you.
3. If you were in the Olympics, what sport would it be for?
4. List as many silly expressions/idioms that seemingly make no sense ("once in a blue moon", "no use crying over spilled milk", "let the cat out of the bag", etc.).
5. On a long drive, look at the bumper stickers on cars in front of you and develop a character for who you think is driving based on the stickers.
6. What song always makes you want to dance?
7. If any mythical creature could be real, which would you choose?
8. What is a moment in a movie or show that makes you cringe or get secondhand embarrassment?
9. What is your least favorite chore or task to do?
10. If you could describe your personality with a texture, what would it be?
11. If you could travel to any year in a time machine, what year would you choose and why?
12. If you could do a podcast episode or presentation on literally any topic, what would you choose?
13. If you could be on any game show, what one would it be?
14. What is your favorite frozen meal?
15. What is your least favorite flavor of ice cream?
16. For music lovers: Assemble the best band with your all-time favorite musicians.

If you or your child find that face-to-face conversations are just too hard, remember that you have other options! It might be a good idea to create a dual-use journal that both of you have access to. Within that journal, you can still have a series of little *written* conversations, but in a place where you have time to think about what you want to say/share. It is a great way to open up a comfortable starting point, especially for individuals who need more time to process their thoughts and what it is that they want to communicate. Another added benefit? It can help both of you by creating space to process the other's thoughts alone. Sometimes big confessions can be met with big reactions, and having a moment to digest what the other is saying on paper allows for less in-the-moment reactionary responses that can sometimes stop the conversation altogether. Agree to some mutual hopes/terms/boundaries/ideas for the journal, and then commit to honoring each other while you converse on paper.

Possible Topics/Questions to Use A Dual-Use Journal For:

- **What feels really _____ (hard, exciting, good, heavy, etc.) today?**

How often do you ask a kid, "How was your day?" and they respond with, "It was fine," and don't really share how their day *actually* went? Oftentimes when we ask people how their day was, we aren't taking the time to *really* listen and care. Using a journal to create a space for a child to share what was hard, good, exciting, heavy, and other experiences can offer them an opportunity to unpack what has been going on, express any feelings they might have, and feel seen and heard. You can even fill in the blank with a different word to describe their day each time you use the journal.

- **What do you wish was different about your life?**

The truth is there are several parts of a child's life that they can't control and honestly, they may wish certain parts of their lives were different. Using a journal for a kid to have a space to express their thoughts and feelings can help them to feel a sense of autonomy, or at the very least, like their voice is being heard. With this type of question, the goal isn't to take their wishes and change everything but instead to simply allow a child the chance to express what they are feeling. (Example: a kid deserves the space to be able to say that they wish their parents weren't divorced even though it most likely won't result in them reconciling.)

- **What are you nervous to talk to me about?**

Sometimes kids feel nervous talking about the specific things happening in their lives with a parent or guardian, and maybe it's because they are afraid of what the response will be, how they will be perceived, or they're just plain scared to ask the question. Using a journal can be a space for a child to ask those questions that feel scary in a way where there is time to process and think it through.

- **What do you need help carrying?**

When kids come across things that make them feel uncomfortable or anxious in their world (school, work, hanging out with friends, etc.) they may not have someone to help them carry the weight of those feelings or questions. Using a journal for this type of topic/question allows them room to write some of those uncomfortable things without having to experience the anxiety of saying it out loud or asking face to face.

If your conversations with your teen begin to reveal that they are having a difficult experience and their mental health is suffering as a result, it may be time to point them to resources where they can get the care they need and deserve. Seeking professional help is oftentimes a much-needed step in the right direction. They may be resistant to it, but if you as the adult can speak to the value of bringing in the right people/person at the right time, it will make a world of difference. Talking to someone beyond their parent or guardian offers them some autonomy to explore their thoughts and feelings independently, which can be valuable as well. And if your child feels nervous about talking with a mental health professional, reassure them that you support them on this journey and you can even offer to go with them to start.

Additionally, connecting with your child about their mental health may bring up big feelings for you too. We see you and acknowledge that parenting *is* challenging. Walking alongside our kids is a long journey that can take a toll on the people who look after them. If you are feeling overwhelmed, unappreciated, or unsure of what to do next, know that you are not alone. Asking for help for yourself when you need it is a key part of this journey. Ultimately, taking care of yourself allows you to better care for others.

Our [FIND HELP Page](#) features different resources that you can share with your teen including Crisis Text Line, Suicide Prevention Lifeline, and our very own FIND HELP Tool. Use our FIND HELP Tool to locate free or reduced-cost counseling and other mental health resources in your community. Select the level of care you're looking for and enter your zip code.

- TWLOHA Blogs
 - [Depression Isn't a Personality Trait](#)
 - [I Was Afraid Asking for Help Would Make Me Look Weak](#)
 - [Redefining Success In Order to Stay Alive](#)
 - [Seeking Therapy For the First Time](#)
 - [What Anxiety Looks Like](#)
- TWLOHA Podcast
 - [Episode 402 - Eating Disorders: What We're Not Talking About Is Killing Us](#)
 - [Episode 403 - Self-Injury: Shrouded By Shame](#)
 - [Episode 404 - Bipolar Disorder: The Space Between Diagnosis and Identity](#)
 - [Episode 410 - Affirming LGBTQ+ Experience and Existence](#)
 - [Episode 502 - Being a Safe Space For Someone Who Self-Injures](#)
 - [Episode 509 - Empathy and Eating Disorders](#)
- Additional Resources
 - [Tips On Listening to Your Child - familyeducation.com](#)
 - [Tips For Communicating With Your Teen - Child Mind Institute](#)
 - [Adolescent and School Health - Centers For Disease Control and Prevention](#)