

TIPS ON HOW TO TALK TO YOUR CHILD ABOUT THEIR MENTAL WELL-BEING AND ABOUT MENTAL ILLNESS

Talking to your child about their mental health may seem like a daunting task, but one of the most critical aspects to managing mental illness is WIDE OPEN COMMUNICATION. The more comfortable you are with talking about emotions, feelings and, if need be, illness, the more solid the foundation of trust you will build with your child.

Here are just a few tips on how to talk with your child about how they're feeling:

1) Work on de-stigmatizing the language around mental illness in your own mind. Many adults have a difficult time even saying the words "mental illness", never mind applying those words to their own child. If you seem to stumble over those words, practice saying them out loud. Mental illness is nothing to be scared of, ashamed of or threatened by - so say the words out loud and practice using them. Normalize them as best you can in your mind before you speak to your child about this topic.

2) Be open and honest. As mentioned above, one of the most important aspects to helping your child, whether they will be diagnosed with a mental illness or not, is open and honest communication. Talking openly about emotion and mental health may be difficult for you and your child, particularly if this is a new way to communicate, but the more open and honest you are about what you've noticed, how you're feeling and your true desire to help, the greater and stronger your journey down this path together is going to be.

3) Don't sugar-coat. Talking about mental health and mental illness with your child is a big deal and can be a very serious topic. It deserves to be treated as such. Try not to sugar-coat anything or talk to your child like they're a baby (this advice is coming from an 11-year old boy diagnosed with 4 mental illnesses). If you have noticed their behaviour has changed, you can almost guarantee your child has been feeling differently. Having you acknowledge this change will most likely come as a relief to them. So be direct with your words and use language suitable for their age.

4) Be truthful, not hurtful. Mental illness and changes in mental health may have caused your child's behaviour to change dramatically. It can be frustrating, nerve-wracking and daunting to address behavioural problems, particularly if they are less desirable behaviours. As you begin to navigate along your journey, try to remain as honest and truthful as possible without hurtful or negative comments. Many of these new behaviours from your child may be just as upsetting for them as they are for you, so helping them understand what you've noticed and how it makes you feel will go a lot further than telling them the behaviour is "bad" or "naughty" or "insert hurtful comment here."

5) Be as prepared as possible for their response. You have no idea how your child will respond to initial conversations about how they are feeling with respect to their mental health and/or mental illness. They may feel relieved that you've noticed a change. They may feel angry that you're talking about something that is upsetting for them. They may feel sad if they feel like they're letting you down somehow. Try to be prepared for any reaction.

The best way to do that?

Stay loving. Stay compassionate. Try to be as understanding as you can possibly be. This advice holds true for your entire journey through diagnosis and/or evaluation of your child's mental health.