

# Starting the Conversation

How to talk with your teenager when you are worried about their mental health and safety

Raising what are often difficult and uncomfortable subjects with your teenager can be a challenge. It is important to understand that it is okay to not have the answers, and that yes, this is a difficult conversation, for both of you, and there are things you do to help make this a little easier.

**First, identify any personal worries you hold about having the conversation?** As a parent, you may feel worried about what to say, you may have concerns about saying the wrong thing and making things worse, or you may be worried about not knowing how to help when they share something that is challenging or painful.

**Consider how you would respond to a broken arm?** Like most parents, you would drop everything and be at your child's side, trying to comfort them while calling an ambulance or carrying them to the car. You would not be thinking about how you can fix their arm. When it comes to mental health, the same is true: you do not need to know how to fix the problem, be it an immediate and urgent matter, or a problem brewing. What is needed is an open channel of communication, so that if needed, you and your teenager can find the appropriate support or solution together.

**Think about how your teen may be feeling?** They may be worried that you will be upset, angry, anxious, or that you may try to take control in a way that prevents them opening up to you. They may be scared and suffering deeply. They may be severely depressed and unable to see any light of hope, even if you can see the hope for them. They may be riddled with so much anxiety that rational thinking is no longer possible. They may be feeling guilty or ashamed of what they are doing. They may be suicidal. When a teen believes their parent can respond in a calm way and really listen, without judgement or criticism, they are more likely to open up. Before starting the conversation, think about what you need to be calm, manage your emotions and to be fully present for them.

**If your teenager approaches you first...**

- Let them know you are glad and relieved that they came to you
- Really listen, without any judgement or criticism, and take what they say seriously.
- Don't make it about you and start to talk about your problems
- Validate what they are saying: let them know that 'It's normal to feel the way you do (stressed anxious, sad, angry) about these problems', if how they are feeling matches the situation. However, if how they are feeling seems excessive in relation to the situation, let them know that you feel concerned about how the situation is affecting them, that you are worried about how they are thinking or speaking about themselves, and that you would like to offer them a chance to speak to someone

confidentiality about how they are feeling, to help them cope with their thoughts and emotions.

- Ask them 'what do you need?' Sometimes teenagers know what they need; they may identify a need to speak confidentially to someone, they may need you to intervene with a situation, they may need your support in changing a behaviour, or they may need a couple of day's to simply stop, relax and rebalance.

### **How to start the conversation with your teenager...**

- Think about the timing? Are they more open and relaxed at the weekend, in the car at the end of a school day, or after all their homework is done and the pressure of the day is over?
- Start Casual: ask about how their day was, how things are with their friends or studies.
- Let them know what you are observing - 'I have noticed you saying a lot of negative things about yourself recently and I feel worried about you'.
- Talk openly and honestly about what you are seeing and how it makes you feel
- Acknowledge the discomfort – tell them that opening up about personal thoughts and feelings can be hard and sometimes scary
- Tell your teen that talking about a problem can help
- Let them know you are ready to listen, without judgement, and see if you can work together to address the problem and find a solution
- Actively listen: this means reflecting on what they are saying (so what you are telling me is ...), validating what they are saying (It's okay to feel the way you are feeling, many people feel this way when.... happens), clarifying what they are saying (Ask for more details about the issue), being present (keep your internal chatter silent), and interpreting the feelings and emotions behind their words (I understand that you are feeling...). This demonstrates to them that you are really hearing them, and that you genuinely care and want to understand how they are feeling and what is happening. You are not trying to fix them, problem solve, take control, judge or punish, you are simply being there, with them, hearing what is happening for them. This creates the opportunity for them to open up and to begin to allow you to start helping them.
- Ask them what do they need and how you can support them?
- If you are concerned about serious matters, such as suicide, ask them direct questions, such as: 'Have you ever hurt yourself?' 'Have you ever thought about ending your life?' 'Do you have a plan?' Do you have the items needed to carry out the plan? If you teenager has had thoughts or has hurt themselves in the past, this does not mean they are actively suicidal. However, if they have a current plan to hurt themselves or take their life and the means to do so, do not leave them alone and seek professional help immediately.

## What can you do when your teenager refuses to get help?

- Ask them who they do feel they could talk to? (Is there a trusted adult, a family member, or teacher for example)
- Let them know that you will continue to ask how they are, keep loving them and will be here to listen when they are ready to talk.
- If they are in immediate danger to themselves or others, you can take them to hospital or call an ambulance and have them assessed at the hospital.

If you would like support for your teenager, please contact me via email to schedule a call to discuss your needs: [antonia@antoniabehan.com](mailto:antonia@antoniabehan.com)

If you are interested in learning more about adolescent psychological well-being and mental health, you may be interested in 'The Parents Mental Health Masterclasses'.

This is a collection of workshops that are offered individually or as a complete course, presented on a one-to-one basis, in-person and online.

Learn about 'The parent mental health masterclasses' [here](http://www.antoniabehan.com/parents-masterclasses1.html).

<http://www.antoniabehan.com/parents-masterclasses1.html>

Antonia Behan  
Coaching Psychologist  
BSc, MSc, MBPsS, MICF PCC  
Qualified professional coach  
Certified Trauma Specialist  
[www.antoniabehan.com](http://www.antoniabehan.com)  
[antonia@antoniabehan.com](mailto:antonia@antoniabehan.com)  
0034 620 741 361

Office based in Pueblo Nuevo de Guadiaro, beside Sotogrande, Cadiz.