

Ten Considerations for GPs Talking to Young People about Mental Health

Disclosing sensitive information about mental health can be difficult for children and young people. And for you, the GP, it can be tricky to know what are the right things to say to put the young person at ease. Providing a calm and welcoming environment, and showing that you are willing to take the time to listen to your patient, are important first steps in helping to start the conversation.

Our clinical team has put together ten important considerations for engaging and supporting children and young people in conversations around their mental health.



Respect Privacy

Always respect the young person's privacy and be clear about confidentiality - young people just want to know where they stand and feel you are being transparent with them when it comes to sharing of information.

Don't Downplay

Try to avoid the temptation to down-play how a young person may be feeling, even if this is a well intended attempt to 'normalise' their experiences. This may be helpful further down the line - but taking this approach too early can be off putting for young people - sit with their feelings for a while first.

Not Alone

Not to be confused with 'normalising' too quickly, do remind the young person that they're not alone - just hearing this can be powerful and you can do this without minimising their experiences.

Hear Me Out

Try not to jump too quickly to solutions/advice giving; linked to the above, it is actually more helpful to spend time in the early stages focussing on the 'problems' - not only does this help young people feel heard; they often start to naturally talk about some of the solutions themselves and that sense of self discovery is important.

Balancing

In the early stages, finding the balance between listening and asking questions is tricky! As a general rule, the more a young person feels listened to, the more likely it is that they will value the interaction and come back for more help. Ask questions, but try not to overload them!

Reactions

Be mindful of your own reactions - if a young person feels 'judged' (no matter how unintentional), they are unlikely to feel able to be open with you.

Open Ended

Asking more open ended questions generally encourages meaningful conversation whereas questions with yes/no answers (whilst sometimes necessary) can shut young people down in the early stages.

Here to Help

Let the young person know that first and foremost you're here to help them and try to create an environment where there is space for them to talk or express how they are feeling...the following tips should enable this.

No Pressure

Shifting early questions away from 'what's wrong' to 'what's happened' can be a really useful way of helping young people to tell you about themselves without feeling pressured to respond to a question that they may not have an answer to ('what's wrong' typically leads to a 'don't know' or a 'you tell me' response).

I'm Worried

Let the young person know that you are worried about them - many young people feel their mental health related difficulties are trivial and that they should not be bothering other people with them.