

Good Question: How can I encourage a loved one to seek mental health support?

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Experts share tips on how to have supportive, stigma-free conversations.

If someone you care about seems to be struggling with their mental health, it can be hard to know how – or whether – to talk to them about it. Many people worry about saying the wrong thing, sounding judgmental, or making a situation worse. But experts say that the goal of talking about mental health isn't to diagnose, fix, or force an outcome; it's to create connection, reduce stigma, and help your loved one feel supported. Having this safe space can make it easier for someone to take the next step and seek out professional support.

“These conversations don't need to be formal sit-downs,” says Dr. Claire Harrigan, a psychiatrist with Cleveland Clinic Canada, which serves as medical director for Group Benefits at Manulife Canada. “Start by just letting that person know that you're willing to listen and be present for them.”

Dr. Allison Crawford, a psychiatrist at the Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) and the chief medical officer of 9-8-8: Suicide Crisis Helpline, agrees. “Sometimes sitting down, face to face, can be too intense, especially for those who are more reluctant to talk or who have difficulty expressing their feelings. We sometimes say, ‘Shoulder to shoulder is better than face to face.’ For example, talking while you're engaged in an activity together, like walking the dog.”

We asked Dr. Crawford and Dr. Harrigan how to recognize when something may be wrong, how to start the conversation with care, and how to encourage someone to seek help.

What are some of the signs that a loved one might be struggling with their mental health?

Dr. Crawford: The most important thing to know is that there isn't one single sign indicating that someone needs help. You might notice mood shifts: more anger, sadness, or irritability. There might be a change in their outlook: becoming more pessimistic, more hopeless, or feeling stuck. Or you might see a change in how they're acting: Are they struggling to keep up with routines, self-care, work, or social connections?

If I notice these changes, how soon should I initiate a conversation?

Dr. Harrigan: Ideally, you're being proactive rather than reactive, and creating a safe space to talk about mental health with friends and family members before someone shifts into crisis mode. One way to do this – if you feel comfortable – is talking openly about your own struggles with mental health. This can help to normalize the conversation and open the door for others to reciprocate.

Talking regularly also helps you understand what's going on in your loved one's life. For example, you might learn that your spouse has something stressful coming up at work. In that context, maybe changes in their sleep or their reluctance to socialize would make sense. It gives you a better barometer for when they're really acting out of character or seem to be struggling in a way that isn't typical for them.

How can I set the conversation up for success?

Dr. Crawford: It's important to bring up your concerns at a time when you can listen fully and be present. You don't want to rush it; you want to create space for it.

Dr. Harrigan: It's really about being an active listener. And you can demonstrate active listening not only through what you say, but through your body language. Making eye contact that's not too intense or nodding your head as someone is talking to you are signs that you are paying attention to what you are hearing. Paraphrasing – or reflecting back – what someone has told you is also a useful tool because it shows them that you're listening, and it gives them the opportunity to correct you if you're misunderstanding something.

What can I do if they get defensive or shut down when I bring up my concerns?

Dr. Harrigan: A lot of the time, people who are well-meaning come into these conversations wanting to name the problem and fix it. However, it can feel as though you are minimizing someone else's problem when you assume that you know what they are experiencing and choose to dictate how they should solve it. Saying "I know what you're going through right now" isn't as helpful as saying "I'm not in your shoes, but I'm here to help you."

You could try asking someone what *kind* of help would benefit them the most right now. For example, is it emotional support, assisting with day-to-day tasks, or helping to research mental health care resources? This allows the person to let you know what would be helpful for them and gives them their power back. If you still feel like you're getting a lot of pushback, don't force the conversation. Acknowledge their hesitation and say, "I'll follow your lead. If you ever want to talk, please know that I'm here to listen."

Dr. Crawford: The goal of the first conversation isn't to get to solutions – it's to create connection. It can be hard to take the time and be patient when someone we care about is in pain. But if we rush in too quickly with advice, the unintended consequence is that it can seem like we're not listening.

If my loved one is open to receiving help, what are some next steps that I can take?

Dr. Crawford: Once that channel of connection has opened, the next step is to say, "There is help available" and "You deserve support." Those are very important messages because they introduce hope. Then you can move into collaborative problem-solving. You might say, "Do you want to brainstorm some ideas?" or "What are you thinking might help?" This is empowering because it acknowledges their own skills, strengths, and autonomy.

Key resources that can support your loved one

- **First-line professional support:** If they already have a therapist or a family doctor, those are the best places to start when seeking help and guidance.
- **Community-based resources:** Calling 2-1-1 can help connect them with local resources.
- **Workplace benefits:** If they have workplace benefits, it may be worth looking into what mental health support is available. These can include Employee and Family Assistance Program (EFAP), virtual care (such as TELUS Health Virtual Care), or mental health & counselling services (offered by TELUS Health).
- **Crisis support:** If a loved one is feeling hopeless or having thoughts about suicide, they can call or text 9-8-8 for confidential support. Research¹ shows that asking about suicidal intent does not increase risk.
- **Emergency help:** If someone is at imminent risk of harming themselves or others, or if the situation is physically dangerous, don't hesitate to call 9-1-1.

What does ongoing follow-up look like? How often should I check in?

Dr. Harrigan: It depends on your pre-existing relationship and how close you are. You don't want to be overbearing, but you also don't want them to feel as if you've lost interest in them. Checking in every week or two with open-ended questions can be helpful. Asking "How have you been doing since we last talked?" or "You mentioned you were going to check out that support group – did you like it?" may work better than putting pressure on them to report back to you on their progress.

Dr. Crawford: It is also absolutely okay to set boundaries while still signaling that you're there for ongoing connection and support. Clarity and straightforwardness are usually best here. Let your loved one know what your availability and capacity are to help, whether that's checking in daily, weekly, or otherwise.

It's also important to make sure that you consider support for yourself if you're feeling distressed, or if that other person's stress becomes too difficult for you. Like them, you don't have to carry it alone.

Prevention at work

Your benefits plan may cover costs for mental health services and include resources to help you care for your mental health and overall well-being. Look for benefits including:

- [Employee and Family Assistance Program \(EFAP\)](#)
Immediate, confidential support when you need it most.

- [Mental health & counselling services](#)

A digital access point for faster, easier access to mental health support.

- [Healthcare Online \(virtual care\)](#)

24/7 access to certified health professionals for primary care, mental health, and wellness—anytime, anywhere in Canada.

- [Personalized Medicine \(pharmacogenetics\)](#)

Helping you find the right medication sooner for better health outcomes.

Your privacy matters: All services are confidential, and your personal health information is protected.

Members can also find mental health tips and resources on the [Manulife Mobile app](#).

Employers can read more about mental health & counselling services [here](#).

This article is for informational purposes only. It is not intended to diagnose or treat a condition. If you have questions or concerns about your specific situation or are seeking medical advice, contact your medical doctor or your health care provider.

Cleveland Clinic Canada

Manulife is proud to have Cleveland Clinic Canada on board as Medical Director for our Group Benefits operations. Cleveland Clinic Canada has a wealth of global health care expertise and shares our goal to help Canadians live longer, healthier, and better lives. Cleveland Clinic is a nonprofit organization that has been at the forefront of modern medicine since 1921. In recent years, Cleveland Clinic has worked with progressive companies in Canada and around the world to prioritize the health and well-being of their employees, customers, and communities.

CAMH

The Centre for Addiction and Mental Health (CAMH) is the largest mental health hospital in Canada, and a world leader in mental health and addiction research. Through the Manulife Longevity Institute, Manulife funds research related to women's health, via CAMH's womenmind™ program and the Women's Health Research Cluster (WHRC). This investment helps improve preventative mental health support and strengthens long-term health outcomes for women's longevity across life stages.

SOURCES

[¹ Suicide Risk: Detecting & Assessing Suicidality | CAMH](#)