

#RealConvo Guide

How to Start (and Continue!) a Conversation About Mental Health



You don't need special training to have an open, authentic conversation about mental health - and often, just talking about it can be the first important step in understanding where someone is with their mental health, and helping them get support or treatment if needed.

Here are some quick pointers you can use for having a #RealConvo with the people in your life.

1. Let people know you're willing to talk about #MentalHealth

The easiest way to let people know you're willing to talk about mental health is to be open about your own. Try to think of it in the same way you think about your physical health. Allow it to come up naturally in conversation in the same way.

If you've seen a mental health professional in the past, when the subject comes up, you might say, in your own words:

"I've had times in my life when I've struggled. I went to talk to someone, and it really helped me."

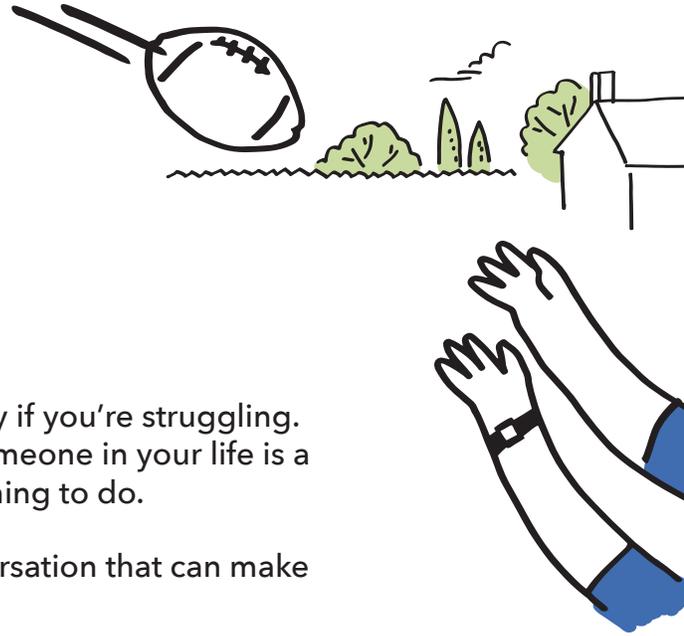
A casual reference like the one above can have a powerful effect, letting others know you're a safe person to talk to if they ever need to reach out.

2. What can you say to someone you think may be struggling?

Trust your gut if you think someone's having a hard time, and speak to them privately. Start with an expression of care, followed by an observation.

"I care about you and I've noticed you haven't been yourself lately. You seem more frustrated than you've been in a while, and I'm wondering how you're doing."

#RealConvo Guide



Reaching Out for Help

It can be hard to talk about your mental health, particularly if you're struggling. But reaching out for help by having a #RealConvo with someone in your life is a necessary step to take in feeling better. It's also a strong thing to do.

Here is some straightforward guidance for having a conversation that can make all the difference.

1. Get the conversation started

The best way to broach the subject of your mental health with someone is to treat it as something important. (Because it is!) You might say:

"Hey, there's something I'd like to talk with you about. It's kind of important to me and I'm wondering if we can make some time."

2. Schedule a time

If that moment isn't convenient for both of you, lock in a time.

"I'm wondering if you have a few minutes at lunchtime for us to talk today."

"Is there a good time I might call you this evening?"

3. Don't give up

Just because you're ready to have a conversation, it doesn't mean it will be convenient at that moment for the other person. This doesn't mean they don't care about you. Keep in mind that just as others may not realize everything that's going on with you, you also don't know what may be on their minds at the moment.

If the person you first reach out to isn't available, for whatever reason, try someone else. And keep in mind - especially if you're really struggling - that help is always available, even if you're not facing a serious or suicidal crisis. Resources like the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline (1-800-273-TALK), or the Crisis Text Line (text TALK to 741-741) are available for anyone, and can connect you to help.

4. Face to face (or ear to ear)

Explain what it is you've been experiencing - changes in your thoughts, feelings, behaviors, sleep, energy and mood. You might tell them you've been feeling overwhelmed, anxious, or depressed, or like your usual coping strategies are barely working any more. You might also tell them that you've been "not feeling like your usual self," or that you're "having thoughts that are troubling to you." (Keep in mind that it works both ways: just as situational stress can impact our mental health, sometimes our mental health can affect the way we are coping with a situation.)

So as you're explaining what's been going on in your life, be sure to identify any changes in your mental health that you're aware of, so your friend can understand the full picture. Talk about not only the things affecting you, but how they are affecting you. For example, instead of saying, "Work has been really stressful because my boss does x, y, z..." try to identify how the stress at work has been impacting your mood, anxiety, sleep, temper or frustration tolerance, substance use, and so on.

It's also helpful if you can look back and try to figure out how long the changes you've been experiencing have been going on. Did they happen gradually (over weeks to months), or more rapidly (hours to days)?



Bonus Round! You get extra credit if you can think about what's tended to either help or worsen your mental health symptoms. This information will help your friend understand and support you, and together you might even be able to brainstorm some positive next steps to consider.

5. After the Convo

Now that you've opened yourself up in such a brave, strong way about what you're experiencing, you might be feeling a little nervous.

"What does this person think of me now?" "What if I've scared them away?" "Are they going to avoid me for now on?" Some folks call this a Vulnerability Hangover.

What you might do, after the conversation has taken place, is to reach back out to them, thanking them for taking the time to speak, and letting them know, once again, how important the conversation was to you.

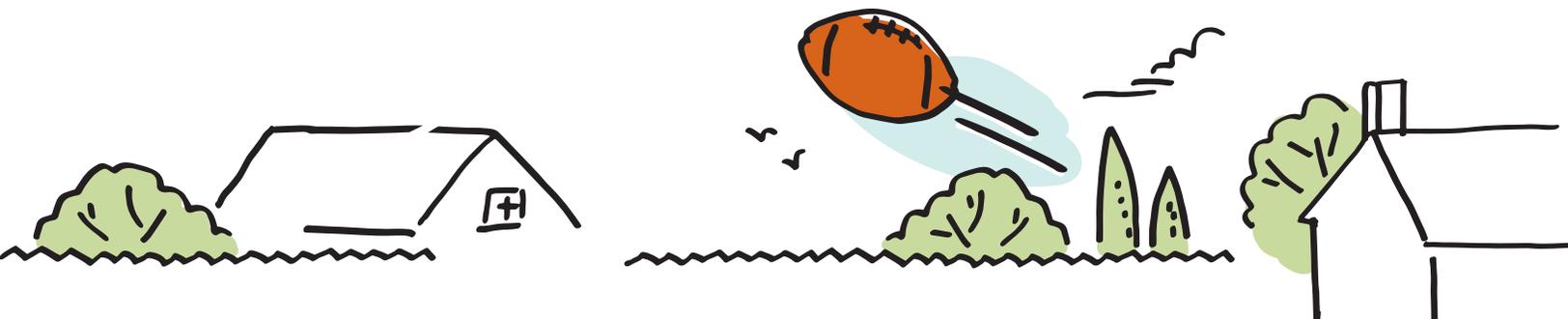
"Thank you for taking the time to speak with me the other day. It really was important to me to let you know how I was feeling."

"I appreciate your friendship, and that you were willing to have such a personal conversation."

Sometimes, no matter how willing a person is to have this kind of conversation, and no matter how much they care about you, they may be scared to reach back out, nervous about handling it in the right way. (For practical guidance on how anyone can have a #RealConvo with someone they're concerned about, [click here](#).) Reaching back out like this gives the other person an opportunity to continue the dialogue with you going forward, and lets them know you're not avoiding the topic, yourself!

Congratulations! You've had a #RealConvo about your mental health!

In the same way you speak up about your physical health, reaching out and talking about your mental health is a very necessary, and strong, thing to do. It's hard to experience mental health issues such as depression or anxiety. The good thing is, you never have to face anything alone.



#RealConvo Guide

If Someone Tells You They're Thinking About Suicide

Let's say you're having an open, honest conversation with someone about mental health - you can find tips on how to do that here - and they feel comfortable enough with you to reveal that they're having thoughts of suicide. You probably feel an immense amount of pressure. How should you respond? What can you do to connect them to help?

First of all, realize that someone opening up in this way is a positive thing, because it's an opportunity to help. Here are some ways you can respond.

1. Let them know you're listening

First of all, reassure them you hear what they're saying, and that you're taking them seriously.

"I'm so glad you're telling me about how much has been going on, and how you're feeling. Thank you for sharing this with me."

2. Show your support

In your own way, make sure they know you're there with them, and that you care.

"I'm right here with you."

"Nothing you're going through changes how I feel about you, and how awesome I think you are."

"I love you no matter what, and we're going to get through this together."



3. Encourage them to keep talking - and really listen

Let them know you want to hear more about how they're feeling, and what they're going through. Listen actively by expressing curiosity and interest in the details.

"Wow - that situation sounds really difficult."

"How did that make you feel when that happened?"

4. Ask them about changes in their life and how they are coping

Find out how long it's been that the person has been feeling this way, and any changes it's caused in their life.

"How long have you felt this way? When did these feelings start?"

"Have these thoughts led to any specific changes in your life, like trouble sleeping, or keeping up with work?"

"Have you been getting out as much as before? Are you isolating yourself?"

5. Be direct if you suspect they're thinking about suicide

If you think someone's thinking about suicide, trust your gut and ask them directly. Research shows it will not put the idea in their head, or push them into action. Often, they'll be relieved someone cares enough to hear about their experience with suicidal thoughts.

"Are you thinking about killing yourself?"

"Does it ever get so tough that you think about ending your life?"

Make sure not to sound like you're passing judgment (DON'T say: "You're not thinking of doing something stupid, are you?") or guilt-trip them (DON'T say: "Think of what it would do to your parents.")

Instead, reassure them that you understand and care.

"I really care about you, and I want you to know you can tell me anything."



6. What can you say if they tell you they're thinking about killing themselves?

Stay calm - just because someone is having thoughts of suicide, it doesn't mean they're in immediate danger. Take the time to calmly listen to what they have to say, and ask some follow-up questions.

"How often are you having these thoughts?"

"When it gets really bad, what do you do?"

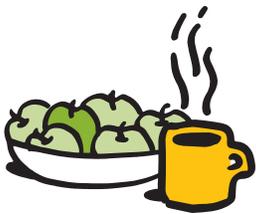
"What scares you about these thoughts?"

"What do you need to do to feel safe?"

Reassure them that help is available, and that these feelings are a signal that it's time to talk to a mental health professional.

"The fact that you're having these thoughts tells me something significant is going on for you right now. The good news is, help is out there. I want to help you get connected to resources that can help."

7. Follow their lead, and know when to take a break



This is a tough conversation to have, so make sure the other person knows they can stop if it feels like talking about it is too hard for them at the moment.

"Are you okay with continuing to talk about this?"

"I want to support you, and I'll be here if you want to talk more later."

8. How to suggest they could benefit from professional help

You are being a great person in having this supportive conversation - but you're not a mental health professional. If the person you care about has told you they're thinking of suicide, it's a warning sign that they should speak with a mental health professional. Here's how you can broach the subject.

"I hear you that you're struggling, and I think it would really be helpful for you to talk to someone who can help you get through this."

"You know, therapy isn't just for serious, "clinical" problems. It can help any of us process any challenges we're facing - and we all face serious stuff sometimes."

"I really think talking to someone can help you gain some perspective, and keep things from getting worse."

"You're in good company: the highest-performing executives and elite athletes lean on mental health professionals to hone their performance. Reaching out for professional guidance and therapy is a strong thing to do, and it can make all the difference."

9. Help them connect

Sometimes making that first moment of contact to professional help can be the hardest. Offer to help them connect in whatever way you're comfortable with.

"I could call your insurance with you, or go online to find a mental health professional or substance use program. Or I could sit with you while you do it. We can figure it out together."

"I could drive or walk you to your appointment. Then we could have coffee afterwards."

10. If they're concerned about privacy

If the person is worried about others finding out that they're getting treatment, let them know their worries are mostly unfounded.

"Mental health treatment actually has even greater confidentiality safeguards than physical health treatment."

"Most people realize that mental health is an extremely important, valid part of health in general - and we all have various kinds of health issues. People who get support for their mental health are seen as strong, smart and proactive."

If they ask you not to tell anyone, tell them you want to help them get the support they need - and that that may involve enlisting the help of others. Encourage them to be part of the conversation that happens in reaching out for help, and reassure them you'll be as discreet as possible in your effort to keep them safe.



11. What if they refuse?

Not everyone is ready right away. If someone you know is struggling refuses your suggestion of professional help (and if they aren't in immediate danger, i.e. that they are not presently self-harming or about to), be patient and don't push too hard.

"It's okay that it doesn't sound like you're ready yet. I really hope you'll think about it. Just let me know if you change your mind, and I can help you connect with someone."

"I know you're going through a lot, and I really believe it can make a big difference for your life, and your health. Just consider it for later, and know I'm here to help."

"If you're not ready to go in and meet with someone in person, you could call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline at 1-800-273-8255, or if you don't feel like speaking, just text TALK to the Crisis Text Line at 741741. They can tell you more about what it might be like to work with a doctor, counselor or therapist."

You can also offer to speak with their primary care provider as a gentle next step - family and friends can provide information to health care providers without expecting a call back or for the HCP to provide any confidential health information back.

When the convo's winding down...

End the conversation by reiterating that you are so glad for the chance to connect on this deeper level about such meaningful things in life. Remind them that we all have challenges at times, and that you'll continue to be there for them.

If they're in immediate danger

- Stay with them
- Help them remove lethal means
- Call the National Suicide Prevention Lifeline: 1-800-273-8255
- Text TALK to 741741 to text with a trained crisis counselor from the Crisis Text Line for free, 24/7
- Encourage them to seek help or to contact their doctor or therapist



#RealConvo Guide

How to Talk to a Suicide Loss Survivor



Talking to those who have lost a loved one to suicide presents challenges beyond the discomfort we commonly feel in the presence of grief. Despite our best intentions, our eagerness to comfort someone or to fill a long silence may unwittingly cause us to say hurtful things. Similarly, the fear of compounding the loss survivor's pain by saying the wrong thing may cause us to self-edit in unhelpful ways or lead to our avoiding those who are grieving altogether.

Below are ten helpful tips to help you navigate conversations with suicide loss survivors in a kind, thoughtful, and responsible way.

1. "I don't know what to say, but I'm here for you"

Suicide loss is complicated, devastating, dumbfounding. There are no easy answers and no easy fixes. Be a patient, nonjudgmental listener. Be a safe place for the loss survivor to give voice to their anger, frustration, fear, relief, sadness, or any other emotion they may feel. Or just be there with them - the reassuring presence of someone who cares may offer a lot of solace.

2. Refrain from saying, "I understand what you're going through"

Because suicide loss is not like other losses, you cannot truly understand how the loss survivor is feeling. That's okay, and it's okay to acknowledge as much, too - it shows that you recognize the complexity of the loss survivor's grief and helps keep the conversation open.

3. Do not ask intrusive questions about how the person died

If the loss survivor does not bring up the suicide method, assume they would prefer not to talk about it. If they do mention how their loved one died, do not ask for details beyond those that the loss survivor volunteers. On the other hand, you don't have to avoid the subject of the death

altogether. Instead, offer a no-pressure invitation to talk: Are there things about the death that the person who's grieving would like to talk about? If not, let them know you are there to listen if they ever do want to talk.

4. Avoid pat advice and hurtful clichés

Other than reminding the suicide loss survivor to take care of their basic self-care needs (getting rest, getting exercise, eating nutritiously), try to avoid direct advice-giving; there is no one right or wrong way to cope with a suicide loss. In addition, if there are any children who are affected by the suicide death, it is up to the loss survivors closest to them to determine what to tell them, how to tell them, and when. Refrain from offering unsolicited advice such as, "They are too young to hear about such a death," or, "Just say it was an accident."



Remember, too, that some of the common phrases we reach for when expressing our sympathies - "She's in a better place," "Everything happens for a reason," "You are never given more than you can handle," and "You'll get over it" - may be hurtful in that they minimize the magnitude and nature of the suicide loss survivor's grief.

5. Do not place value judgments on the suicide

Do not refer to the suicide as a selfish choice, a sin, an act of weakness, or a lack of faith or love or strength.

6. Do not assign or imply blame

In trying to answer the question of why, suicide loss survivors often place blame on themselves. Be careful not to say things or ask questions that might suggest they're responsible for the suicide, whether directly or indirectly: Was there something they did to upset the person? Something they didn't do? Did they miss any warning signs? Did they fail to take the signs seriously? These questions may feed the fears, regrets, and self-recriminations that the loss survivor is already struggling with or, worse, introduce new ones at this already fraught time.

7. Be proactive about offering help

People often find it hard to ask for help, or may not even know what kind of help they might benefit from, especially in the shock of the early days following a suicide loss. For that reason, a simple, "Let me know if you need anything" may not suffice. Offer help repeatedly and specifically. What everyday things that might be adding stress can you help with in the short term? Does the loss survivor need help running errands or picking up the kids from school?



Would they like someone to just sit with them for a while? Making concrete suggestions shows that your offer to help is genuine, and will make it easier for the loss survivor to accept.

8. Don't be afraid to talk about the person who died

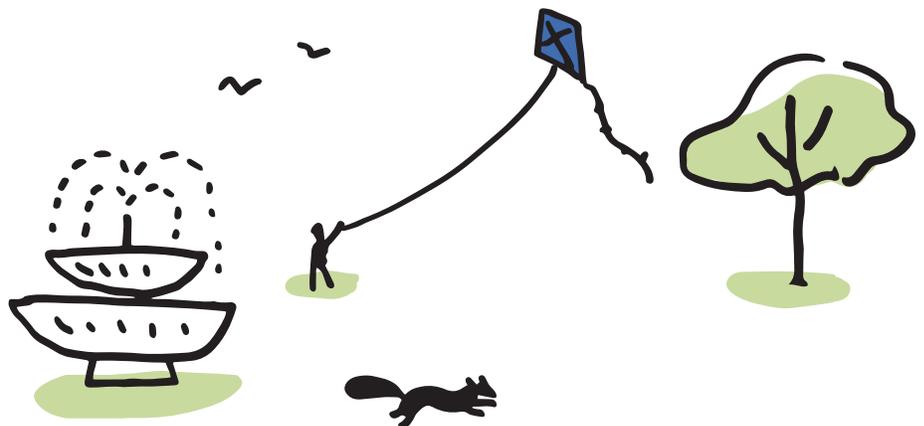
Say their name as you would after any other loss. Give the loss survivor an opportunity to reminisce with you about the person they loved.

9. Be patient

Don't place a timeline on the loss survivor's grief; healing after a suicide loss is a lifelong journey. Well-intended though they may be, frequently heard phrases such as "This too shall pass," and "You need to move on" can make the loss survivor feel pressured to "get over it."

10. Don't disappear

Remember that the weeks and months following the funeral, when the initial shock wears off and the full reality of what has happened sinks in, may be the toughest for the loss survivor. Continue to check in with them, let them know you are thinking of them, and that you're there for them.



Normalize mental health by talking about it directly.

"I wonder if what's happening at work these days is stressing you out."

"With everything that's going on in your family, I wonder if you're feeling overwhelmed."

Let them know you get it, and that it's okay - and normal - to struggle in response to life's challenges.

"I've been through things in my life, too, and what I've often found is that talking about it helps. Whatever it is, I'm here to listen and support you."

3. The timing doesn't have to be perfect

You may not always be able to speak with someone the moment you notice they might be struggling. It's fine to circle back some other time soon.



"The other day I noticed you seemed upset. I made a note that I wanted to talk with you. I'm really concerned about how you're doing. So let's talk."

Sometimes creating some space is the perfect thing to do. Let them know you can have the conversation at a time that's right for them.

"Can we grab some coffee and talk about it?"

"Would you like to go for a walk?"

4. What if they hesitate?

The other person might worry that sharing how they feel will be a burden to others. They might say something like, "You must be sick of hearing about all of this," or, "I don't want to saddle you with my problems."

In your own words, tell them:

"Not only am I not sick of it, but I care about you, so I want to be there for you. I get that life is complex - so I'm here to listen and support you."

5. Would they be more comfortable talking to someone else?

If you suspect the other person might be more comfortable talking with someone else, you can offer to help connect them.

"Is talking to me about this helping you right now? Or is there someone else you'd feel more comfortable with, who we can bring in to help support you?"

6. What if they tell you they really are having a hard time?

Reassure them that it's okay to talk about.

"You know what? Everyone goes through periods in their life when they're struggling. But just because you're struggling now doesn't mean you'll always feel this way."

Then ask for more detail, and let them know they can go to that dark place with you.

"What's the worst thing about what you're going through right now?"

And make sure to include that getting help from a mental health professional can truly make a big difference in their situation.

7. When the convo's winding down...

End the conversation by reiterating that you are so glad for the chance to connect on this deeper level about such meaningful things in life. Remind them that we all have challenges at times, and that you'll continue to be there for them.

Nicely done! You've had a #RealConvo about mental health! How do you follow up?

Give yourself a pat on the back for having a #RealConvo with someone!

But don't just leave it at that. Follow up to let them know it was okay to open up, that you care, and that you're still a "safe" person to talk to about mental health.

"You know, you've been on my mind since we had that conversation the other day."

"I've really been thinking about what we talked about, and I want to circle back. How're you feeling since we spoke?"

Being available to have a #RealConvo about mental health is an important way we can all be there for the people in our lives, whether it's a friend, family member, or someone in your community. All it takes is a willingness to be open, honest and present with the people you care about.

We all have mental health. Reach out and have a #RealConvo with someone in your life today.

