

How to support your child's mental health

Parenting can be difficult even at the best of times, so when mental health issues are involved it can become overwhelming.

1. Take a step back

It's normal to feel negative emotions if you are worried about a child's mental health. But although you might not be able to control your emotions, you can stop your emotions from controlling you.

Take a step back, wait until your emotions have died down, and try to see things from the other side.

Tips for reducing the impact of your emotions

- When you feel strong emotions, try to pause and take a deep breath before reacting.
- Remember that your feelings are towards the situation and not the child.
- Try to focus on being supportive rather than apportioning blame.

2. Start a conversation

Talking about what they're going through can be uncomfortable for both of you, especially if you're not used to it, but healthy dialogue is one of the most important aspects of good mental health, and leaving things unsaid and unresolved often makes things worse.

Effective ways of starting a conversation about mental health

- Tell them what you've noticed or what you're concerned about and ask how they're doing.
- Let them know that you're there to support them and want to help.
- Text messages and emojis can help to ease you in if conversation is difficult at first.

Things to avoid when having a conversation about mental health

- Try to avoid being judgemental, making accusations or generalising behaviours with phrases like 'you always...', or 'you never...'
- Sitting across a table can feel like an interrogation. It's better to talk on walks or journeys when you're both heading in the same direction.
- Don't go rushing in with all the answers if they begin to open up. Just being there and listening to what they have to say can make a big difference.

3. Think and act like a team

Getting through any difficult situation is easier if you act as a team against the problem rather than against each other.

Tips for bonding and teamworking

- Keep in mind that you both want the same outcome, which is the child's health and happiness. You might not always agree but remember you are both on the same side.
- Try to identify a shared goal and work towards it by breaking it down into small steps
- It's natural to want to focus on problems, but it's also important to celebrate wins and positive steps, as well as trying to create a routine that includes activities you enjoy doing together or as a family.

4. Be patient

The journey from mental illness to mental health can be challenging, with many highs and lows along the way. It requires a lot of patience, support and understanding.

Tips for building resilience

- You won't always get things right, so remember that you're only human. Don't beat yourself up too much when you get it wrong.
- Physical health and mental health go hand in hand. Establishing healthy habits and routines will make you both feel mentally stronger.
- Think about things that you are grateful for and try to visualise the future you hope for. This is made easier by reminding yourself of previous occasions when you've come through adversity.

5. Reach out

Mental health issues are more common than you might think, which means there are a lot of other people who have been in similar situations whose experiences may help.

Advice on where to reach out for help

- Your GP or local health centre will be able to refer you to specialist professionals, useful resources and support groups in your area.
- Young Minds is a charitable organisation focused on young people's mental health, offering training resources, support and advice. Visit <https://www.youngminds.org.uk/>

Some additional resources that may help

- NHS advice for supporting the mental wellbeing of others. Better Health: Every Mind matters <https://www.nhs.uk/every-mind-matters/supporting-others/childrens-mental-health/>
- For information on how to access NHS Mental health services visit <https://www.nhs.uk/nhs-services/mental-health-services/>
- Mind.org offers dedicated advice about parenting a child with a mental health problem <https://www.mind.org.uk/information-support/tips-for-everyday-living/parenting-with-a-mental-health-problem/helping-your-children/>
- Happy Maps has reliable resources recommended by parents and professionals. <https://happymaps.co.uk/>