

# Starting a conversation



Many people are unsure about how to start the conversation though, especially when worried about a friend... so here are some ideas, inspired by people whose friends or loved ones did start the conversation:

## Persevere

***"It took me a lot of time to be honest with my friend. It was about the fifth time she asked that I finally admitted something was wrong."***

If you're worried about a friend, finding the courage to have the conversation once is likely not to be enough. Your friend may have had ongoing issues for some time and they may be absolutely terrified to open up about them. They may fear the reaction they'll receive. They may be upset or confused about their own thoughts or feelings. They might simply not have the right words to say. So don't just ask once. Persevere with your offers of kindness and listening, you never know when the right moment for the conversation might arise.

## Chat whilst doing other things

***"My friend finally opened up to me when we were skating in the park. I guess it felt a bit less intense and we were relaxed."***

This could be a pretty intense conversation and might simply feel a bit too much one-to-one. Talking about these issues whilst doing something else you both enjoy might help to break the ice a bit and let the conversation flow slightly less intensely.

## Say something

***"I didn't know what to say but eventually realised that the only wrong thing to say was nothing, so I just got on with it and started the conversation. It felt a bit awkward at first but not for long."***

Even if you fumble over your words or don't say quite the right thing, saying something shows we care and it gets the conversation started. The more we're open to these conversations the more quickly we'll learn the right and wrong things to say. At the start, the only wrong thing to say is nothing at all.

# Act normally

***“My Mum gave me some really good advice, she said ‘He’s still your friend, nothing can change that, just talk to him like you would about anything else, he might be ill but he’s not a different person.’”***

Just because they might have a mental health issue doesn't mean someone suddenly turns into a completely different person. Just talk to them as you always have – draw on the things that normally fuel your conversations and make you feel good together.

# Don't judge

***“I was worried what my friends would think about me – it was really important to me to know that they wouldn't judge me because of my self-harm.”***

Those of us with mental health issues live in constant fear of judgement. A good friend never judges, they just open their arms and hearts and offer unconditional support. Make it clear that you are that friend from early on in the conversation, you won't believe the relief your words and actions will bring.

# Let your friend tell their own story

***“The most helpful thing my friend did was just listen and let me talk.”***

Don't assume or guess what your friend is going through or why they feel the way they do. Instead just listen. Let them tell their own story, even if that is slow or difficult at times. It can be hard, especially when we're just getting started with opening up, but it's our story, not yours – listening is the very most helpful and important thing you can do just now.

# Think about next steps

***“I was too scared to ask for any help, but my friend helped me realise why it was important, and she came with me too.”***

If a friend feels safe opening up to you, discuss with them about what you might do together to try to make things a little easier. What support could you seek and how could you go about that together? The journey is a lot less lonely and terrifying when you have a friend to accompany you.

Taken from : <http://www.inourhands.com/skills-building/timetotalk-tips-for-starting-mental-health-conversations/>

# Listening



Listening is one of the skills we most value in those around us, whether we're speaking to our boss, our friends, our parent or child, or just a passing stranger; feeling like someone is really listening when we're speaking makes us feel valued and enables us to share what's on our mind. Many good listeners share several traits in common: emulating some of these can help you to become a better listener and to become the person who people feel cares enough for them to open up to.

## Set aside time for listening

Sometimes we don't have time to be a good listener because we have other pressures on our time. That's fine and it's far, far better to be honest about it and explain – “This feels like a really important conversation but I'm worried I'll miss my train. I've got some time this evening, can we sit down then when we can both completely focus on it?” – than to continue to allow the conversation to happen with half an eye on the time and your mind already elsewhere.

## Completely focus

When you're listening to someone, make listening your sole activity. Put your phone on airplane mode. Turn off your screens. Find somewhere quiet where you won't be interrupted and make it clear to the person that you're listening to that they have your complete attention. Even before anything else has been said or done, the person you're listening to feels valued and supported.

## Walk and talk

Depending on the topic of conversation, it can be pretty hard for people to open up – sitting face to face across a table might feel intimidating but sitting side by side can feel less so. Less so still is walking or driving whilst you talk, or perhaps participating in a creative activity that you both enjoy. Always be ready to listen – sometimes it's the most unlikely moments when we're engaged in an activity with a friend when they suddenly feel safe enough to open up.

## Talk less

The best listeners often say very little and they don't make assumptions about what is about to be said. Instead, they give the person who is talking with them the space, time and occasional prompting to tell their story in their own words. Don't be afraid of

silence. Whilst the room may seem uncomfortably quiet to you, the person you're listening to may be trying to make sense of a huge amount of noise going on in their head and it can take a little time for them to find the right words to explain things to you.

## Never judge

We are most likely to open up when we do not fear judgement or ridicule from the person we're speaking too. Depending on the subject matter, we may have an opinion, but try to resist from forming or sharing judgements early on in the conversation. Instead just listen to what you're being told.

## Ask considered questions

Open questions can be a great way to help encourage the conversation. Considered questions – whether open or closed – are a great way of showing that we're really listening. They can also be a great opportunity to clarify what is being said to us if there's something we don't fully understand or there's a gap that we feel needs to be filled.

## Repeat back what has been said in your own words

Reflecting back what someone has told us in our own words is another great way to clarify what is being said and to ensure that any misunderstandings are rectified early. It also signals that we have been consistently listening.

***You can apply these skills in any context but they are especially valuable when you are worried about someone and want to help them open up about what is on their mind. Listening doesn't come easily to everyone, but it's worth practising because it's a skill that will stand you in good stead in the many different roles you play in life.***

Taken from: <http://www.inourhands.com/skills-building/7-ways-to-be-a-better-listener/>

Other useful links:

<http://www.inourhands.com/free-resources/>

<http://www.inourhands.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Listening-to-your-child.pdf>

<http://www.youngminds.org.uk/>

<http://www.nhs.uk/livewell/youth-mental-health/pages/Youth-mental-health-help.aspx>