

## **Mental Health Tip of the Month – January 2020**

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### **Parent Tip: How to talk with your child when you feel concerned that they may be struggling with a mental health concern:**

It can be challenging to talk about mental health. Sometimes parents, like others, avoid the conversation because they don't know how to start or they worry that they might put thoughts into their child's head that had not been there, and will therefore, make things worse. Research tells us that this is not the case. *Bringing up worries, concerns, changes in behaviour etc. with your child will open the lines of communication rather than worsen the situation.*

### **Here are some tips to help you talk to your child about mental health:**

- Find a quiet time when you are unlikely to have interruptions to begin the conversation.
- Reassure your child that they can tell you anything and you will not get angry with them (even if you get scared).
- Start the conversation with describing changes you have noticed in their mood, behaviour, reactions etc. e.g., "I have noticed that you seem to be crying more." If you have had conversations with your child's teacher about concerns, include comments from the teacher's observations.
- Share that you "wonder" about how your child might be feeling, what they might be thinking, what they might be worried about etc. e.g., "I wonder if you're feeling sad about losing your friendship with Sam."
- Allow your child time to reflect before they answer.
- Stay calm and don't abandon the conversation if your child responds with "Nothing is wrong.....leave me alone". If this happens, reassure your child that you are there for them. Give your child some time and then try again.
- If your child tells you anything that makes you worried (e.g., thoughts of suicide, overwhelming anxiety, self-injurious behaviour like cutting) reassure your child that you are glad they told you and you will [help them find the right professional](#) to talk to, and you will be there for them throughout the journey.

Please see <https://smho-smso.ca/> for more information.

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### **Student Tip: How do you ask for help?**

Asking for help can appear like a big step, but it isn't as hard as it seems. Once you have decided to ask, and have an idea of who you will approach, it is a matter of finding a few words to start off with. The rest usually falls into place because you are then sharing the burden with a caring adult.

[Staying well](#) strategies are always a good first step in keeping good mental health. But if you are seeing signs that changes in your thoughts, emotions, or actions have been going on for more than a few weeks, and are impacting you negatively, it is time to seek out support. But how do you ask for support? And from whom?

Questions to reflect on:

These questions can help you decide whether to ask for help.

- Is how I'm thinking, feeling, or acting different for me? A change from how I used to be?
- Are my thoughts, emotions or actions affecting my everyday life negatively?
- Have I been feeling this way for some time, like more than a couple of weeks?
- Am I dealing with my problems in unhealthy ways?
- Am I carrying too much by myself?

If you or your friend answered mostly yes to these questions, it is probably time to connect with an adult who can help. Reaching out can prevent problems from getting worse.

Here are some conversation starters:

"I haven't been feeling well lately and I think I need some help."

"Things haven't been going well for me. I need some help to turn things around."

"I can't seem to get past the feelings I'm having. I wanted to reach out before things got worse."

"I don't know if you can help me, but I'm hoping you can help me to find someone who can. I'm worried that I have a problem with my mental health."

"I'm not good at asking for help, and I wish I didn't have to, but I don't think I can handle this alone. Can you help me?"

Where can I ask for help?

Still not sure?

If you're ever wondering if you might need help with your mental health, you can always speak to a teacher or another trusted adult like a parent, relative, principal, coach, faith leader, elder, or your family doctor. You can also call Kids Help Phone and speak to a trained counselor to see if getting more help might be a good idea.

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**School Tip: How to notice and identify when a student may need mental health support:**

You are well positioned to recognize when a student may need additional support because you have almost daily contact with them. You might notice a change in their behaviour or pick up on a pattern. Watch for changes in performance or behaviour and consider:

- frequency
- duration
- intensity
- appropriateness for the student's age and stage
- interference with the student's life

School Mental Health Ontario (SMHO) developed a short heuristic method to help you notice and identify students who may need more support – ONE CALL.

**Observe** – Know your students' typical behaviour and responses.

**Notice** – Notice changes in behaviour or mood of the student.

**Explore** – Seek out information about the things you are observing – you can use the resources on our site to help. Remind yourself of your school's [circle of support process](#).

**Connect** – Consider connecting to others in the circle of support depending on the nature and severity of your concern. Follow your school and board protocols and pathways.

**Ask** – Make a connection with the student to see if they are open to a conversation. Ask the student how you can help.

**Listen** – Actively listen and validate the student's experience.

**Link** – Link students to other supports in the school where appropriate.

Early identification of concerns can prevent future mental health problems. While it's not your job to diagnose, or provide treatment, you're a critical and supportive link between students who are struggling and the resources they need to flourish. You're also part of their ongoing circle of support.

Schools are the most common place where Ontario youth access help.

[The 2014 Ontario Child Health Study results highlight why your role is so important:](#)

- 18 to 22% of children and youth in Ontario meet the criteria for a mental disorder, but less than one third of those children and youth have contact with a mental health provider.
- If children and youth do have contact with a mental health provider, school is the most common place where they access support.

We are very fortunate at HCDSB to have professionals embedded within our schools to support students with a variety of social and emotional challenges. In addition, we have strong community partnership pathways to refer our students and families who may have greater needs. However, it is a collective and shared responsibility to support all students within our school communities and you are an important and critical person in the circle of supporting our students.

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