

# Talking to someone about mental health

**Poverty Alliance members told us that** it can be a challenge to know what they could do practically to open up conversations around mental health when they recognise that people might be struggling with personal issues.

**We heard that** members recognised that talking is often the first step to accessing the right support, but wanted to be more confident about starting conversations in a supportive way.

Sometimes, it will seem obvious that someone is having a hard time, but starting a conversation about their feelings can be challenging, especially if we are worried about them. It is important that we respond sensitively, but don't hesitate to start a conversation.

Talking is often the first step to finding help and support when someone is having a hard time. Waiting and hoping they will come to you for help might delay getting them the support they need.

We know that conversations can sometimes be difficult and emotionally demanding.

**To help you, we have created the following four sets of tips.**

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## 1. Starting the Conversation

**Be open and direct:** To start a conversation about mental health, choose the right time and place, somewhere free from interruptions. Be direct and open when starting a conversation. Show interest in the person and build a rapport by recognising and acknowledging their feelings, experiences, and background.

Ask questions like

"How are you feeling today?"

"Is there anything you'd like to talk about?"

"What has been going on for you?"

"I noticed you were quiet today. Is everything okay?"

**Use open-ended questions:** Avoid questions that can be answered with a quick "yes" or "no." Using open questions such as "How," "When," "Why," or "What" encourages a person to share their feelings, concerns, and opinions.

**Check in and reflect back:** Show you are interested and following the conversation by checking that you have correctly picked up what they have said and understand what they are trying to communicate. Ask follow-up questions to clarify or better understand the situation.

**Active Listening:** This can improve well-being by promoting empathy and understanding and giving a sense of being heard and valued. Give the person time to share their experience, stories and concerns without trying to fix the problem. Minimise distractions, and listen attentively to their stories and worries without interrupting or feeling the need to jump in and say something.

**Avoid unsolicited advice:** Unsolicited advice can be stressful and damage relationships. Instead of offering answers, focus on what they want. Support people's feelings of safety and sharing their stories by asking open-ended questions that start with "How," "What," "Where," or "When".

**Validate their feelings:** Experiences of inequality can be isolating and emotionally challenging. Demonstrate that you care about their experiences by acknowledging their emotions and letting them know you understand their feelings, even if you disagree with their perspective.

**Reassure:** Opening up about feelings can feel risky. It is not unusual for a person to feel worried about what will happen with what they've shared, worry that they have said too much or shouldn't have said anything. Thank the person for sharing with you, and reassure them that talking is the right thing to do.

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**Problem-solve solutions together:** Sometimes, mental health and well-being advice might not feel suitable for someone experiencing financial hardship.

Self-care activities like eating healthily, running a bath, and lighting candles all cost money. We know that accessing green spaces and nature can be good for our mental health, but those spaces also need to be safe.

Encourage people to problem-solve and identify solutions for their well-being.

Ask questions like

'What things help you relax?'

'What helps take your mind off your worries?'

'Where do you find space to be quiet?'

'What do you do just for yourself?'

**Ask how you can help:** Instead of assuming what a person needs, ask them directly what would help them cope just now and be clear about what you can offer. Instead of saying "I'm here if you need anything", specify things you can do.

This could include contacting a foodbank, making a referral to a local playgroup, walking group, or lunch club, or identifying resources that can promote self-care.

You can find information on health and well-being resources, services, groups, activities, and support in Scotland's local communities online at [www.aliss.org](http://www.aliss.org)

**Respect their choices:** Respect their autonomy and the right to make their own decisions, even if you disagree or don't understand their reasoning. Even if you disagree with a choice, you can still show respect by being supportive and avoiding negativity.

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## 3. Encouraging other help and assistance:

**Social Networks:** Social Networks can be an essential protective factor for our well-being. Consider how you can support people in developing their social networks. This might include opportunities for participation in local community groups or activities, joining a local arts group or working group or supporting their involvement in volunteering opportunities.

**Signposting to other support:** Familiarise yourself with local support services and other services and support groups in your area. If the person is struggling with a mental health issue, gently encourage them to seek professional help. Guiding people towards resources and services, helplines, and local support groups can improve wellbeing by helping people access the support they need when they need it.

## 4. Taking Care of Yourself:

**Set boundaries:** Protecting your mental health and well-being is essential. Be clear about what you can offer, establishing clear expectations and limits for what you can do.

**Seek support for yourself:** Talk to a colleague or manager about your feelings and the challenges of supporting someone else.

**Practice self-care:** Taking care of your mental health is important too, especially when supporting others. Make time for activities that help you relax and recharge

**Remember that you can't fix everything.**

### Resources and Support:

**Scotland's Mental Health First Aid:** Participants develop skills in asking appropriate questions, listening without judgment and giving guidance about where help can be found. SMHFA courses are run all over Scotland year-round. <https://www.smhfa.com/>

**Living Life** is a free phone service offering therapy for anyone in Scotland aged 16 and over with Low mood, anxiety or depression. Living Life offers phone support using cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) techniques—self referral for an assessment by phoning 0800 328 9655. The phone service is open Monday to Friday, from 9 am to 9 pm.

**Breathing Space:** is a free and confidential phone service for anyone in Scotland over the age of 16 feeling low, depressed or anxious. Phone 0800 83 85 87 (6 pm to 2 am, weekdays and 24 hours at the weekend). Calls are free from landlines and mobiles.