



Talking to kids about mental health

Talking about mental health is difficult – even for adults. When it comes to discussing mental health with children, the challenge can be even greater.

A good place to start is by asking yourself how comfortable you feel talking about mental health, says Carmel Watson, marriage and family therapist and organizational assistance specialist at Manitoba Blue Cross.

“Take some time to reflect on how you were first introduced to the concept of mental health and mental illness – these are two different things – how you take care of your own mental health and what message you want to send to your kids about mental health,” she says.

The way you think about mental health and your comfort level with the topic can influence your discussions with your kids.

“Ideally, we’d like people to start talking about their mental health in the same way they’d talk about their physical health – without stigma or judgement,” Watson says.

If your knowledge on mental health and mental illness is limited, it’s important to do research before tackling the subject with your kids. With increasing awareness over the years, there are abundant resources available, including books, videos, and articles from a range of experts.

Creating a welcoming environment

“Simply put, physical health can be described as the state of your body, and mental health is the state of your mind, feelings, and emotions. Kids get that,” Watson says.

Be prepared to engage in conversation with your kids. Together, come up with examples of what is considered physical health and what falls into the mental health category. Help your kids to understand that our bodies and minds are connected, so taking care of one will often impact the other.

“Don’t be afraid to share examples of how you take care of your health,” Watson says. “Allow space for your kids to share and reflect on these topics and practice simply being with them as they process and ask questions.”

As Watson importantly reminds us, “You don’t have to have all the answers. If you aren’t sure how to respond,



simply say ‘That’s a good question. Let me take some time to think about it and learn some more, then we can talk again.’ This shows your child that you are also learning and that it’s ok to ask questions.”

Timing and language

When is a good time to discuss mental health?

“It’s possible that your kids might bring up the topic of mental health before you even get a chance to approach them about it,” Watson says. “Schools are doing a better job of introducing this topic and teaching children such things as emotional regulation and self-care as early as kindergarten. Use your curiosity if this happens and ask your child to explain to you what their understanding of mental health is. Kids are way smarter than we give them credit for and often we think these concepts are too difficult for them to understand and therefore don’t talk to them about it until much later.”

If you are starting the conversation, make sure your child is in a safe and comfortable space to respond. If they bring the topic up, give them all of your attention and show them that you are willing to talk about it with them.

An important consideration is the age and maturity level of your child. You wouldn’t talk to a five-year-old and a fifteen-year-old in the same way, and discussing mental health is no exception.

“Be open and honest with your kids about your own mental health and at the same time, be aware of how and what you share based on your child’s age and ability to make sense of the information,” says Watson.

On top of using age-appropriate language, it’s important to set a good example.

“Avoid using language that further stigmatizes those who are struggling with their mental health,” Watson says. “Pay attention to how you talk about other people and their mental health and remember that kids are always paying attention and pick up on more than we realize.”

Watson recommends avoiding words that label others like “crazy,” “nuts,” or “psycho.”

“When we use these words – whether it’s to describe a person, a situation, or an experience, there is often a negative connotation and therefore those who are struggling with their mental health are less likely to speak up and ask for help if they hear you talking that way.”

Watson also recommends using people-first language. As an example, say “She has depression” rather than “She is depressed.”

“By making these small changes, we are recognizing the person first and showing that we see them as more than their diagnosis.”

Getting help

If your child is struggling, reach out for help. Members with EAP or IAP coverage can get counselling support from a qualified clinician.

For more information call the Employee Assistance Centre at 204.786.8880 or toll-free 1.800.590.5553 or visit mb.bluecross.ca. For the Deaf, hard-of-hearing and speech-impaired community, our EA centre can receive VRS calls.



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