

Vermont Department of Mental Health

MENTAL HEALTH AWARENESS MONTH

Week Four

May 2020

Offering Help

What can we do when someone is down and needs help? What do we do when we are concerned and want to talk about it? And what if the person we're concerned about is a child?

For starters, when we talk with children about good mental health, it is important to make it clear that moods and emotions are different. The cause of our mood is wide-ranging and hard to pin to a specific event. The cause of an emotion, on the other hand, can be connected to something specific that happened. When we are concerned about someone, we can ask them about their emotions and their moods. It can open the door to talking and lead to getting help when it is needed.

When a child, adolescent or young adult is experiencing a low mood over an extended period of time- days or weeks- it is important to make a connection, check in, and offer help. We can tell them we notice they have been low lately and we are checking in because we care about them. It is okay to ask questions. We need to be prepared for what we may hear and avoid acting shocked, interrupting, or offering advice. We need to just listen! We can say back to them what we hear, and ask, "Do I have that right?" That will encourage more conversation.

People are more likely to share what is concerning them when we simply listen. Interrupting, offering advice, minimizing the problem, or arguing about whether their feelings are right or wrong will decrease the chance that they will talk. It is important to remember that everything people do is done to meet a need. If we don't get what we need, we may become frustrated to the point of choosing dangerous or self-destructive behavior in the hope that will solve our problem.

While it is rare, some people – including children and adolescents – may feel so low and disconnected from others that they consider self-harm, up to and including suicide. In fact, suicide is the second leading cause of death among adolescents.

We know that some people are at higher risk of self-harm and suicide due to things in their lives that they may have little or no control over. When children grow up in poverty, for example, or if there is violence at home, they may have more difficulty meeting their needs and dealing well with stress. A list of factors that can put us at higher risk of self-harm or suicide is below, but it is important to remember that most people who have these risk factors do not go on to attempt suicide. It is also important to be aware of them, to pay attention to our children's moods and emotions, and to offer opportunities to talk.

Factors that put someone at risk for suicide

- Poverty
- Violence at home, school or work
- Verbal, emotional or sexual abuse
- Family history of suicide
- Easy access to a firearm
- Divorce of parents/partner
- Harsh or inconsistent discipline styles
- Loss of a loved one or a significant relationship
- Poor health mentally or physically
- Lack of life skills
- One or more prior suicide attempts
- Academic failure
- Unrealistic expectations of oneself or inability to accept failure
- Rejection by peers
- Harassment due to race, ethnicity, sexual orientation or gender identity
- Bullying or being bullied at school/work
- Moving to a new community
- Unemployment
- Homelessness
- Incarceration
- Natural disaster
- Lack of support services

U Matter Suicide Prevention offers these steps to help someone who may be at risk of suicide:

1. Show You Care

- ◆ Listen. Give the person your full attention.
- ◆ Be supportive and non-judgmental.
- ◆ Be honest and direct. Speak slowly and calmly.
- ◆ Be positive and reassuring.
- ◆ Acknowledge the person may feel very sad, alone or in pain.

2. Ask About Suicidal Intent

- ◆ "Are you thinking about suicide?"
- ◆ "Do you have thoughts of killing yourself?"

3. Get Help

- ◆ "You are not alone. Help is available."

You can find help through any of these sources listed here.

Remember: Talking, reaching out for help can be just what someone needs to move from a place of aloneness and isolation to a place of connection and hope.

Adolescents may find these conversations awkward. There are some videos to help us to [Seize the Awkward!](#)



Helping Children Who are Nervous About "Restarting"

Vermonters have been staying home and staying safe for a long time. While many children are eager to see their friends and return to their regular activities, the transition can still be difficult. Here is how you can help.

- ◆ **Take stock of your own feelings to help separate your emotions from theirs.** Your own anxiety might influence how you perceive your child and could influence their own level of fear.
- ◆ **Talk about it.** This can help children feel better and will give you a better idea of the many reason your child might be hesitant.
- ◆ **Take things in small steps.** If your child is nervous about returning to a childcare center, consider a visit (if possible) before opening day, or planning a "warm hand-off" with someone your child can meet beforehand.