



Health & Wellbeing



It's Good to Talk About Mental Health

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It is now widely understood that poor mental health is having a big impact on all age groups across the UK.

According to the statistics body NHS Digital, at any one time a sixth of the population in England aged between 16 and 64 have a mental health problem. Despite the growing public recognition of increasing levels of mental illness, there continues to be a social stigma around mental health. People are still reluctant and afraid to talk about it. For some, it is a question of feeling ashamed of their illness, of seeming weak or unworthy or of being judged by other people. For others, it is an assumption that everybody else seems OK, which makes sufferers feel isolated. It is very tempting to say "I'm fine" rather than really talk about how we feel.

A major study by MIND of more than 44,000 employees in 2017/18 revealed that poor mental health in the workplace is widespread, with 48% of those who took part in the survey indicating they had experienced difficulties with their mental health. Only half of those who had experienced poor mental health had felt able to talk to their employer about it.

In 2007 the Time to Change campaign was introduced with the objective of reducing mental health stigma. One of the big events held every year is their Time to Talk day which runs every February and encourages everyone to talk about mental health.

Why is it so important to talk?

One of the biggest advocates of encouraging talking in the workplace is Prince William, who with his wife Kate and brother Prince Harry, launched the Heads Together initiative in 2017. Heads Together aims to tackle stigma and change the conversation about mental health. At the recent Davos World Economic Forum William talked openly about his struggles with mental health and how talking to a colleague about the situation had helped prevent his own mental health from deteriorating.

There is now a considerable amount of research evidence that talking about mental health is beneficial in promoting greater resilience and mental well-being. Conversations can help people who are struggling in a number of ways:

- Talking and expressing what you are experiencing and feeling allows you to become accustomed to those feelings in a way that gives you control. It can be an effective way to improve your own mental health as well as tackle the associated perceptions and give opportunity for others to open up about their own issues.
- Talking helps you gain a better understanding of how you are feeling and offers opportunity to reflect – there are many situations that leave us emotionally overwhelmed and tense. Whilst we cannot always change what has happened we can find ourselves unable to move forward and stuck in despair. At these times talking can be cathartic and offer a sense of relief.



- Talking about experiences and situations allows us to hear ourselves express our feelings and emotions that we may not have been able to previously express.
- Talking offers an opportunity to build up a support network. In Abraham Maslow’s hierarchy of needs belongingness is one of our basic needs. Everyone needs to feel they have a support system and being listened to can help you to feel supported and less isolated and alone. This is supported by The New Economics Foundation evidence review, “Five Ways to Wellbeing” that found that social relationships are a critical requirement for promoting well-being and for acting as a safeguard against mental ill health.
- Be Yourself – talking about your mental health and wellbeing can help develop self-acceptance and awareness.

It is very clear that talking to someone about mental health has great benefits, but how do you start that conversation?

There is no perfect recipe or format to beginning a conversation and you don’t need to be an expert to talk about mental health. A conversation can just start with a chat over a cup of tea. You can simply start by asking a colleague how they are doing and take time to listen and engage with their response. Acknowledging how the person feels will help them feel supported – it shows you are trying to understand how they feel - for example, “ I’m sorry you are going through this” or “that must be hard”.



It is important to react with empathy and try to avoid being judgemental. Listen and gently ask questions rather than make assumptions. Let them know if you understand, sharing similar experiences can help but remember to keep the focus on their needs.

Try to separate the person from the problem and avoid language that identifies people by their mental health problem. For example, “I understand you have depression rather than I understand you are depressed”. Mental illness should be treated like any physical condition that the person is suffering from or living with and it’s not the person.

Make yourself available to talk to again if needed and let the person know that you appreciate them sharing with you for example “it must be hard to talk about it, thank you for opening up to me”.

If you feel additional or specialist help would be beneficial you can signpost to one of the many confidential services that are available: for example, the Mind Infoline or Samaritans.

For further ideas about talking about mental health, you could watch Time for Change’s Five Tips on how to start a conversation about mental health (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FGiqn5MK1TY>)

Summary

Although Time to Talk day was in February, you can start a conversation about mental health at any time. By giving someone the opportunity to talk about how they are feeling, you can make a real difference to their lives. The more we normalise these conversations, the easier it becomes to talk about mental well-being for everyone.

Reference and Links

<https://www.time-to-change.org.uk/>

<https://www.mentalhealthatwork.org.uk/>

<https://www.headstogether.org.uk/>

www.mind.org.uk/help/advice_lines Telephone 0300 123 3393 (Mon to Fri)

www.samartians.org Telephone 116 123 (Free 24 hours a day)

Brown D. and Triggles N., Mental Health: 10 charts on the scale of the problems, [Online] Available at <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/health-41125009> [Accessed: 27th January 2019]

MIND, MIND's Workplace Wellbeing Index 2017-18, [Online] Available at <https://www.mind.org.uk/media/25781370/workplace-wellbeing-index-insights-report-2017-18.pdf?ctaId=/workplace/workplace-wellbeing-index/slices/index-201617-insights-report/> [Accessed: 27th January 2019]

Aked J., Marks N., Cordon C. et al (2011) Five Ways to Wellbeing, New Economics Foundation, www.neweconomics.org/sites/neweconomics.org/files/Five_Ways_to_Well-being_Evidence_1.pdf

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