

How to talk about mental health

Talking about mental health can make a huge difference. But how can a member kick start a conversation like that?

We asked our 24/7 health support line nurses, midwives and pharmacists, for their top tips on talking about mental health.

ACCEPT EXPERIENCING DIFFICULTIES & THAT IT'S OK TO FEEL THAT WAY

Most of us struggle with our mental health at some point, or points, in our lives; it's not uncommon and certainly nothing to be ashamed of.

REMEMBER NO-ONE IS ALONE

Whether it's a family member, a friend, colleague, a GP or someone at the end of a helpline, support is available - they just need to be reached out to.

BE HONEST

If someone asks how we are, we automatically answer that we are "well" or "fine". But if they ask a second time, or if they express concern, they may very well be genuinely interested rather than just making conversation, and it's OK for the member to be honest about feelings.

TALKING WHILE WALKING OR SITTING SIDE BY SIDE

Face-to-face conversations can feel intimidating, especially for a member who's uncomfortable or unused to talking about their feelings. Walking or sitting side-by-side can be a better way to broach difficult subjects and enable them to talk openly.

TALK ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

Far from being a sign of weakness, acknowledging to others that there's a problem can be incredibly empowering, not to mention a huge relief. It's also an important step towards accessing the help needed, whether that's the support and understanding of a loved one, a reduced workload or time off to recuperate, or professional treatment.

Talking about mental health helps break down the stigma that can keep problems hidden and put an end to the silent suffering of others.¹

1 Headstrong - Talking mental health guide

Dealing with stress, anxiety, and depression

Stress

Stress is continuously talked about online and in the news, from workplace stress contributing towards burnout to financial worries and everything in between. But what is stress?

WHAT IS STRESS AND HOW DOES IT AFFECT US?

Humans have developed the stress response to survive, known as the 'fight or flight' response. When stressed, the body releases hormones and chemicals, such as adrenaline, cortisol and norepinephrine.

Stress can be useful, but problems can occur when this stress response happens too often or during inappropriate situations. Triggers could be anything from paying bills to jumping out of the way of a car. Some stress can help a member perform better but, if longstanding, helpful can become harmful.

Having a continuously raised cortisol level is known to increase the risk of developing type 2 diabetes and high blood pressure, which are preventable conditions. It's also linked to weight gain, obesity, and some eating disorders due to changes in eating patterns in response to stress. Chronic stress can result in withdrawing from friends and family, contributing to mental health conditions such as depression and anxiety.

THE CHALLENGE

There are many ways a member can challenge themselves to treating stress if they feel at risk of 'burn out'. Try one or more of these tips each day (or even give them all a go!)

- 1. No-tech lunch hour** - Lunch breaks are a fantastic time to switch off. Leaving their phone in their drawer - the brain is always trying to solve problems, but it also needs time to relax and recharge.
- 2. Prioritise relationships** - Keep phones out of sight when having dinner with friends and family or partner.
- 3. Choose to get active** - When choosing to get outdoors and do hands-on activities, choose to connect with the environment, body and friends. It's important to try choosing tech-free activities to disconnect.



Anxiety

Anxiety disorders often result in significant negative effects on both mental and physical health. Recognising the symptoms and seeking timely treatment where necessary is essential for managing this condition effectively.

In small doses, anxiety can be helpful, giving us that extra boost to tackle life's challenges head-on. But when it becomes constant or overwhelming, it's time to take it seriously.

WHAT CAUSES ANXIETY AND PANIC ATTACKS?

- 1. Genes** - This tendency might be inherited.
- 2. Stressful events** - Divorce, money worries, bereavement, redundancy, and exams are obvious triggers for anxiety, but usually when the problem disappears, so does the anxiety. But other traumatic events such as car crashes, assaults and fires can leave a member feeling nervous and anxious for months or years - known as post-traumatic stress disorder, or PTSD.
- 3. Drugs** - Illegal highs from amphetamines, LSD or ecstasy can cause anxious, as can excess caffeine.



TREATMENTS FOR ANXIETY

Psychological therapies

- **Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)** can alleviate feelings of anxiety and panic and help change how to think and act. CBT focusses on current problems rather than the past.
- **Exposure therapy** is a treatment used to help people overcome fears, anxiety disorders, phobias, or traumatic experiences. It involves gradually facing the things or situations that makes someone afraid or anxious in a safe and controlled way.

Medication

- Anti-depressants are commonly prescribed to treat anxiety disorders and panic attacks.

Beta blockers

- A type of medication commonly used to treat high blood pressure and certain heart conditions. While not primarily prescribed for anxiety, they can sometimes be used to manage the physical symptoms of anxiety.

It's important to note that medication should be prescribed and monitored by a qualified healthcare professional, such as a psychiatrist or primary care physician. They will evaluate specific symptoms, medical history, and individual needs to determine the most appropriate medication and dosage for the member.

Depression

Depression, one of the commonly occurring mental health problems, is characterised by a constant feeling of sadness, and is very different from temporarily feeling low.

Members living with depression can often experience intense feelings of guilt, low self-esteem and poor energy and concentration, all of which can have a severe impact on day-to-day life.

One of the reasons why depression is so hard to overcome completely is because everyone that lives with it experiences a different combination of some of the symptoms listed below:

SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS

Thoughts and feelings

- Negative thinking and suicidal thoughts
- Numbness or feeling empty
- Helplessness

Behaviour

- Detachment from others and difficulty talking to people
- Self-harm
- Sleeping or eating much more or less than usual

Physical

- Sudden increase or loss of appetite
- Lack of energy
- Increased feeling of aches and pains

If four or more of these symptoms are experienced daily for more than two weeks, it is likely a member is living with a depressed mood. It is recommended they visit a GP to discuss symptoms further.

TREATMENTS FOR DEPRESSION

Self help

- Do enjoyable things and set achievable goals
- Reconnect with others
- Improve diet and increase exercise
- Sleep

Treatments

- Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) - from self-help books to sessions with a therapist.
- Counselling with a trained advisor
- Interpersonal psychotherapy

Medication

- Anti-depressants

Combination therapy

- Usually a mixture of antidepressants and CBT

Other treatments

- Arts therapies such as music or art to help express feelings

Isolation is a common symptom of depression, however it is always important to remember a member is not alone.

Learning how others have learned to live with and cope effectively with periods of depression can be comforting and help members in making that first step to seek help.



PHC's mental health support services



Mental Health Assessments and Support service

Faster access to support and treatment for mental health conditions via our clinically led pathway, without the need for a GP referral. Members can benefit from:

- Talking to an expert without any fuss
- Receiving the right care and treatment
- Quality care nationwide
- Guidance every step of the way

Available to over 18's only and only if Mental Health is a core benefit on the member's plan.



24/7 Health Support Line

Online and telephone access 24 hours a day, 365 days a year to a team of health professionals to answer a member's health questions. Here, a member can get clear health information they can trust, supported by clinical evidence, to point them to services where they can get the care they need.

Our team of experienced health professionals include nurses, counsellors, midwives* and pharmacists*.

*24/7 health support line midwife and pharmacist services available 8am to 8pm Monday to Friday, 8am to 4pm Saturdays and 8am to 12pm on Sundays.



Counselling and Support service

Sometimes daily life can seem full of challenges. So it's reassuring for a member to know they've got somewhere to turn to when they need reliable information or support, and someone to talk to when things don't run as smoothly as they'd like. Members can benefit from:

- Personal support
- Face-to-face counselling
- Counselling via e-mail
- LifeManagement™ support
- Online portal

Available to over 16's only.