

Having the conversation

Why is it important to talk about mental health?



Taking care of our mental health is just as important as taking care of our physical health, and a first step to this is to normalise conversations around it. Physical and mental health concerns can both affect our quality of life, our mood and our behaviour, so it's important that we treat them both as equally important. Having conversations builds awareness, knowledge and understanding, and these are key ingredients to breaking down negative stereotypes, myths and false beliefs. Consequently, it is easier to have conversations without being weighed down by shame, guilt and fear.

Why is having conversations with our parent/carer important?

Parents and carers play a key role in supporting our health and wellbeing, particularly when we are experiencing mental health difficulties. However, having that conversation with our parents/carers can be challenging. This conversation can be difficult for various reasons, including a fear of misunderstanding, stigma, and feelings of shame or hopelessness.

Other than seeking help from clinical professionals, initiating conversations about mental health within the home is important as it can promote experiences of safety, wellbeing, and understanding. It provides parents with the opportunity to have some insight into our thoughts and feelings. What's important is that they hear it from our perspective and in our own words.

More than a sense of relief, this sharing of experiences allows your loved ones to more accurately understand your state of mental wellbeing. By having a clearer understanding of what you are thinking and feeling, your parent(s) or carer(s) can create an environment that is tailored to you and your changing needs.



Challenges of having conversations with our parents/carer

Having conversations about mental health with your parents/carers can be tricky for a variety of reasons. Parents/carers may find it easier to ignore your attempts rather than to listen, or they may even show signs of irritation and say some hurtful things. Don't take this personally! Oftentimes, it is because they don't see mental health in the way we do due to the cultural differences in the way they grew up. It is important to acknowledge that these conversations may take some work. In order to reach a point where you and your parents/carers can understand each other's perspectives and experiences, it may require you to take the first step by understanding their context and then guiding them through the process of having these conversations. Let's break down some of these challenges together:

Cultural differences

- Cultural differences in the awareness, perception and understanding of mental health can make conversations tricky between first generation migrant parents and second generation youth in Australia. Different experiences result in us often not aligning in how our parents see the world and consequently, how they understand mental health.
- Understand that a 'knowledge gap' between the two generations and cultures can lead to ambivalence of raising such taboo topics. Mental ill-health may be a new concept to some parents and carers because it is something they may never have grown up learning about or have anyone talk about.
- There may even be disgrace and shame associated with simply raising the topic in some families. It means that we need to ease our parents/carers into these conversations, and that a bit of education about what mental health is might be a first step. (See section 3.1 on how to begin this conversation)

Language barriers

- In an ideal situation, we would be able to fluently talk about mental health in our parents'/carers' first language but many of us have lost those skills from growing up in a predominantly English speaking environment.
- Words to describe certain feelings and mental health concepts may not translate and be understood in the same way in Vietnamese.
- Not having the right words may make conversations daunting and finding the right words can be tricky, but we can take small steps to remedying this. One of these steps is to build your vocabulary - a starting point may be the glossary that we have provided in section 3.3.2.

Mental health stigma

- Mental health stigma is pervasive, however, it can be even more common in our parents due to it being strongly entrenched in the culture to see mental health issues as simply a weakness of willpower. This may be attributed to upbringing and cultural norms, but because it is so deeply ingrained, aspects of their responses can be stigmatising, and it is sometimes up to us to educate them. This process can hurt, however, there are ways to go about this gently. Some misconceptions that parents might have about mental illness include it being permanent, that only 'crazy people' are mentally ill, that one can just 'snap out of it' or that it's just 'all in the head.'
- We might need to help them re-conceptualise mental health as something like a physical health issue. A suggestion is to explain that the brain can also become ill. When the brain becomes ill, we cannot just will it to go away. The common cold does not just go away; we need to nurse it. It requires ongoing treatment, and there are times when pains can return - there is no permanent cure after therapy either - relapse is possible. Indeed, the uncertainty around how our disclosure of mental health concerns may be received can also be another layer of stress and ambivalence about whether it should be talked about. This is a huge challenge, but like we had explained earlier (add link), the pros definitely outweigh the cons.
- As a result of this stigma, we may fear bringing shame to the family. This is closely tied to eastern cultural values; this is an example of why educating our family on the significance of mental health is a valuable step.
- Fear of how our parents will react, fear of them not understanding can be great barriers to us reaching out. As a result we may end up bottling up a lot of things inside. But there are steps we can take to mitigate that fear, hopefully this resource will be helpful!